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Survival of the fittest.

Let's face it. The foyer isn't a very warm and welcoming place for a newbie in college. I for one, as a new and scared JC, was thoroughly intimidated by the bustling, swarm of students that flood the foyer. The influx of large crowds of groups, and the effervescence of loud chatter and laughter steam up the area, building up to the discomfort that the setting has to offer. But the people love to 'chill in the foyer'. The ones most at home, you can find sitting on desks and chairs surrounded by a circle of friends, all engaging in social banter. During a 10.30am or a 1pm break you would be lucky if you could get a decent place to sit and enjoy a meal. Yet still the foyer maintains its status as the most popular social hang-out in college. What is it about this space that could appear as a threatening social situation and still beckon its crowds?

The presence of what is known as the '*cheerleader effect*', which has been popularized by the TV show 'How I met your mother', is a certain social-psychological phenomenon that seems to be replicated in the foyer dynamics. The observation and recognition of certain attractive groups in the foyer might pose as a threat to certain new members of the college's social environment. On account of research done by Edward Vul and Drew Walker, to validate the accuracy of the phenomenon, they propose that they have found evidence of the cheerleader effect- 'people seem more attractive in a group than in isolation.' This effect involves the interplay of three cognitive phenomena A) The visual system automatically computes ensemble representations of faces presented in a group. This means that the brain perceives these groups of people as a whole and not as a make-up of the different individuals as they are. B) Individual members of the group are biased toward this ensemble average. The individuals of this group are not evaluated by their perceived attractiveness individually but are evaluated by the attractiveness of the group they're in. C) average faces are attractive. The faces in the group sum up to an average by which every member of the group is judged. Even though the individual attractiveness of the members of the group may be poles apart, the group altogether is evaluated on the basis of the group average. This average is higher than the individual attractiveness of the members. Thus any individual in a group will be perceived as better looking for being part of the group. The research done by Walker and Vul involved 5 different stages of the experiment where photographs were shown to a person of groups of people of the same gender and were asked to evaluate them individually on the basis of their attractiveness. The photographs of the individuals present in the groups were then shown by themselves and were rated on the basis of their attractiveness as well. Results showed that the individuals were rated higher when they were evaluated in the group rather than individually.

This is the reason why spending quality time with yourself in the foyer would not be the best idea. The ambience of the foyer would make one feel uneasy if they are not in the presence of a group of familiar faces. Consciousness kicks in when the multitude of your classmates, batch-mates and other acquaintances around you watch you by yourself when everyone around you is involved in social in-groups. The feeling is uncomfortable. Thus arises the need to find yourself a friend's circle or a group. One that would make you feel as though you have some purpose being in an arena with high demands of social mingling. The root for this feeling of social acceptance could be traced back to the natural selection theory by Charles Darwin. This taxonomy suggests that human beings, in order to survive, must ensure their place in a group. Survival of the fittest implies that to be the fittest, you must be surrounded by well-wishers to guard your back. Isolation culminates in the end of the reproductive cycle of a species and stands as a barrier to biological diversity. The feeling of self-consciousness and threat is triggered biologically as the belief of survival screams that groups are stronger than individuals.

Although just being in the foyer, with a group of acquaintances to fall back on for company is not enough. The gazes of the eyes in the foyer belong to those few perceived 'attractive' groups that grab the attention of irregular participants of the foyer. These pioneering foyer circles are those who monopolize their territories and mark it as an in-group with their presence. These 'cheerleaders' have certain traits such as their claim over a certain foyer table, or the large size of their groups. In a college devoid of males, these groups have their fair share of boy members which add to their USP. These traits give them an unspoken aura which would make one feel hesitant to approach the group. Eventually each group finds their people and their place to call their own. The mixed crowds of students diffuse into groups, explicit in their membership, excluding new and potential members.

So I guess the effect of these groups do imply a sense of unnerving at first sight to someone new. But if you're someone who would enjoy the thrills of meeting new people then the foyer is your oyster. With time and amiability you will find your foyer group to call your own.