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## **Well Embedded and Still Lonely?** Loneliness Among Adolescents and Young Adults in Germany

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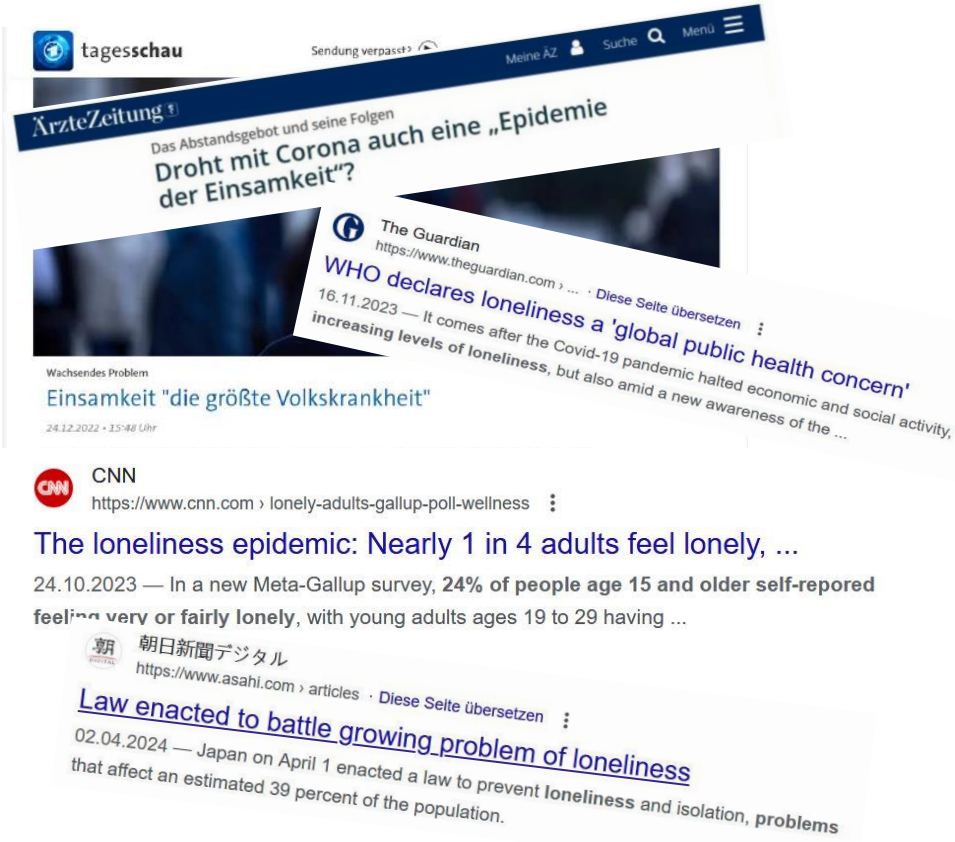
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# A Worldwide Debate – Growing Loneliness within Societies



- Since the COVID-19-Pandemic: Sustained public attention, but also medicalization of loneliness (“loneliness epidemic”, threats to public health);
- Everybody can become lonely;
- Loneliness is not longer connected to specific age group, it hits also youth;
- Political strategies and programs against loneliness (for Germany e.g. BMFSFJ 2023);
- Loneliness as social isolation and desintegration;
- Reporting of Loneliness (e.g. „Einsamkeitsbarometer 2024“ (BMFSFJ 2024));
- Loneliness as indicator for social exclusion in public social monitoring systems?

# An untypical Problem? Loneliness among Youth and Young Adults



Prevalence of loneliness during lifespan often described as a U-shaped distribution, with one of the highest rates among younger people (Bucher 2023, p. 59ff, Hawkley et al. 2020). However, other and more complex nonlinear relationships have been found as well (ibd.).



Loneliness is associated with a lack of social relationships, both, in quantity and quality (Eccles & Qualter 2021). However, loneliness can also be perceived regardless of the breadth and the quality of social relations and social networks (Mund & Buecker 2022, Zavaleta et al. 2014).



Two main clusters of risk factors: lack of resources (material & financial resources, education) (Dittmann & Goebel 2022, Qualter et al. 2021 ) and non-conformity in general and with socially ascribed identities (gender, ethnicity or physical appearance) (Berngruber & Steiner fc., Fardghassemi & Joffe 2022).



Lifestyle & Loneliness: Online activities and/or working remotely are (until now moderately) associated with (growing) loneliness (Ge et al. 2023, Smith et al. 2021).



Loneliness is connected with a row of mostly undesirable outcomes, e.g. mental health problems (Matthews et al. 2016), low perceived social efficacy (Brown-Smythe & Sultana 2023), lower social skills (Moeller & Seehuss 2019) and lower educational outcomes (Jefferson, R., et al. 2023).



There is no clear evidence that loneliness has increased among young people, with the exception of the immediate years of the COVID-19 pandemic (BMFSFJ 2024, p. 19f., Buecker et al. 2021).

# Research Question

Which life-situation- and life-phase-specific characteristics contribute to young people's loneliness?

- H1: Life-situation-specific characteristics, such as economic restrictions, are associated with less social integration, which in turn leads to loneliness.
- H2: Life-phase-specific loneliness affect young people regardless of their social embedding.

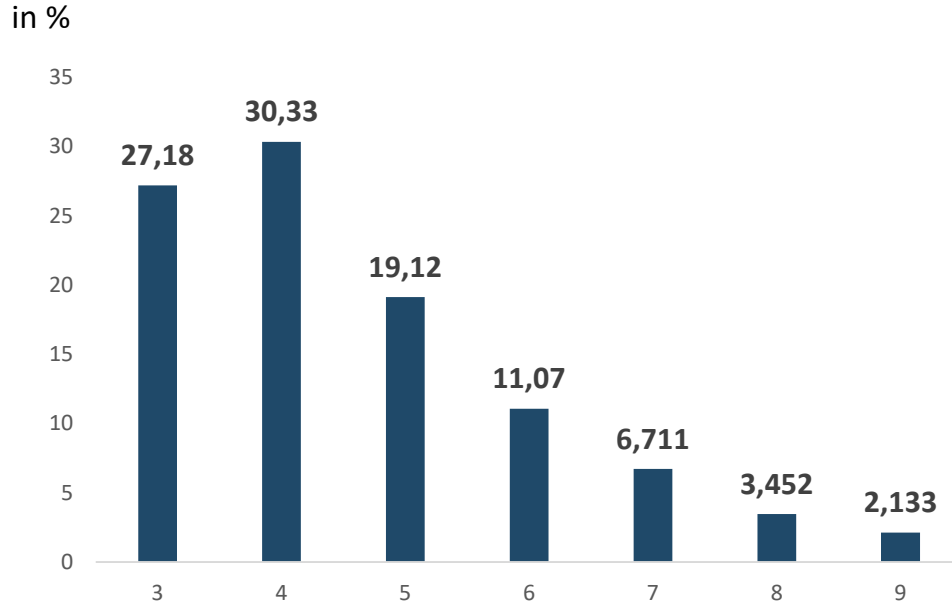
## Data Base

- Survey „Growing up in Germany - 2023“ (Kuger et al., fc.)
- Interviews with parents, children and youth in more than 5.000 households
- Diverse information on the social situation and social integration as well as on education and employment participation
- First time measurement of loneliness for youth and young adults
- Interviews 4.908 youths and young adults aged of 12 and 32 years



# Measuring Loneliness in Large Scales

## The UCLA Three-Item Loneliness Scale (Hughes et al. 2008)



N= 4.776, weighted

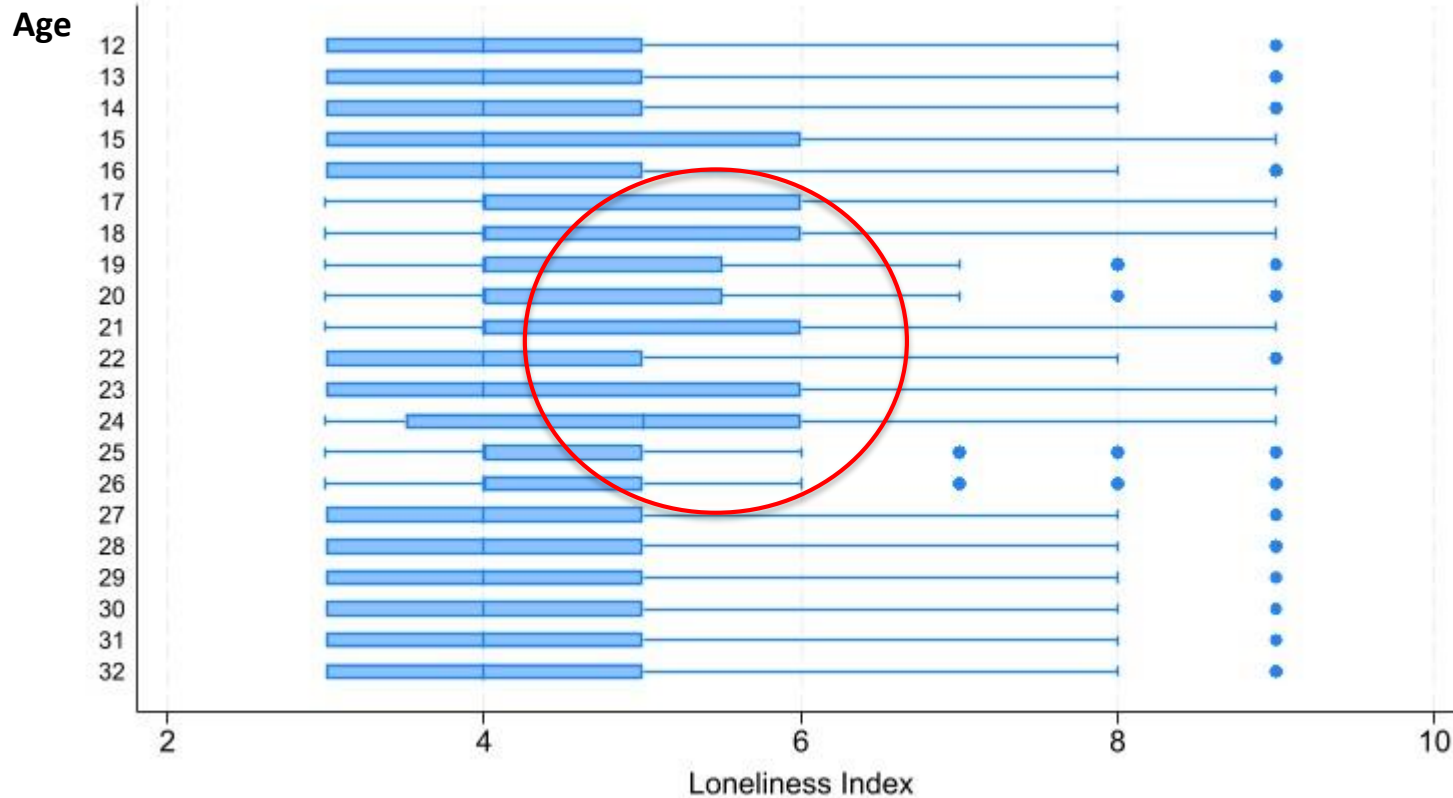
- **Items**  
1= How often do you feel that you lack companionship?  
2= How often do you feel left out?  
3=How often do you feel isolated from others?
- **Each question is rated on a 3-point scale.**  
1 = Hardly ever  
2 = Some of the Time  
3 = Often
- **All items are summed to give a total score (3-9).**  
Mean: **4,59**  
S.E.: **0,03**

# Variables & Measurements

		Mean (S.E.) or %	N	
<b>Social Embeddedness</b>				
	Amount of good Friends	4,50 (.03)	4.765	
	Club membership	0,81 (.02)	4.908	sum of membership in up to 6 clubs (e.g. sport, art) (Min/Max: 0/5)
<b>Education</b>	Non-academic School track	37,7	4.837	
<b>Material/Financial</b>	Deprivation Index	0,46 (.02)	4.839	3 Items: Financial Deprivation -> PASS
<b>Pressure to develop an adult lifestyle</b>				
		1,20 (.03)	4.908	sum of 5 different expectation (e.g. earn money, making a career) (Min/Max: 0/5)
	LSBTIQ* (yes)	10,5	4.569	
	Disability (yes)	14,8	4.887	
<b>Experience of Discrimination</b>				
		1,55 (.04)	4.092	sum of 8 different areas of discrimination (e.g. belongig to a social class, disability) (Min/Max: 0/8)
	Migration (yes)	30,9	4.663	
	Men (yes)	50,2	4.907	
	Age	22,86 (.13)	4.908	

# Findings

# Loneliness among Youth and Young Adults



N= 4.776, weighted



# Predicting Loneliness of Young People

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
zdeprivation	0,122***	(0,036)			0,114**	(0,037)
school	0,194***	(0,057)			0,157**	(0,056)
zpressure	0,103***	(0,026)			0,111***	(0,026)
lsbtqi	0,253*	(0,104)			0,291**	(0,106)
disability	0,202*	(0,079)			0,167*	(0,078)
zdiscrimin~n	0,220***	(0,030)			0,219***	(0,030)
sex	-0,132*	(0,051)			-0,114*	(0,052)
migration	0,053	(0,063)			0,030	(0,064)
zage	-0,027	(0,025)			-0,034	(0,026)
zclub			-0,054*	(0,027)	-0,011	(0,030)
zfriends			-0,116***	(0,024)	-0,084**	(0,026)
_cons	-0,106**	(0,040)	0,008	(0,023)	-0,099*	(0,040)
N	3569		4659		3506	
R-sq	0,148		0,016		0,153	

Standard errors in parentheses

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

All analyses weighted by sample weight

# A Closer Look on Social Embeddedness

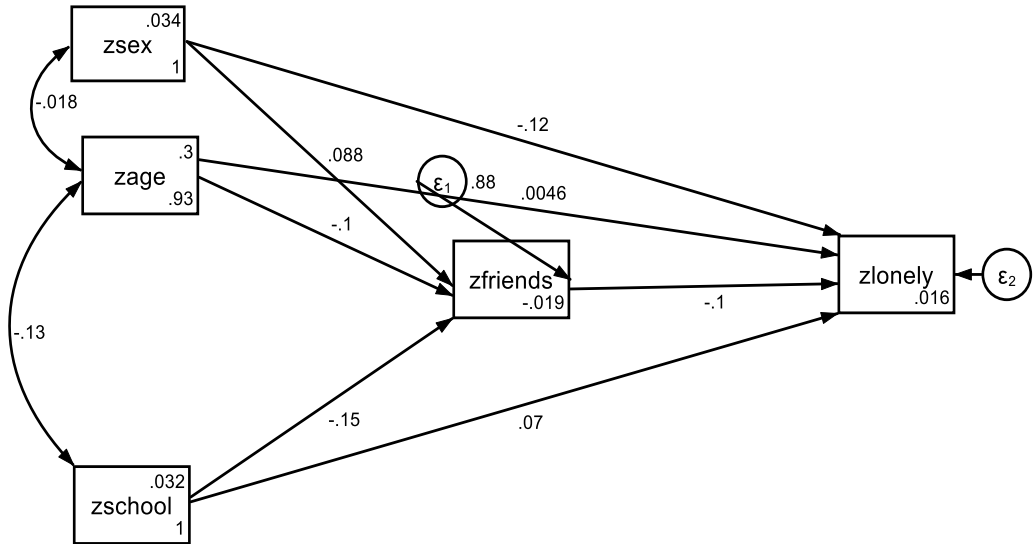
	Club		Friends	
zdeprivation	-0,087***	(0,022)	-0,044	(0,025)
school	-0,212***	(0,047)	-0,281***	(0,046)
zpressure	-0,071**	(0,023)	0,032	(0,024)
lsbtqi	-0,102	(0,074)	-0,009	(0,074)
disability	-0,103	(0,063)	-0,101	(0,062)
zdiscrimin~n	0,084**	(0,026)	-0,040	(0,024)
sex	0,184***	(0,044)	0,125**	(0,043)
migration	-0,220***	(0,050)	-0,082	(0,050)
zage	-0,243***	(0,025)	-0,053*	(0,023)
_cons	-0,006	(0,041)	0,054	(0,037)
N	3622		3556	
R-sq	0,093		0,043	

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

All analyses weighted by sample weight

# Mediation Modell on Loneliness



Young men tend to have more friends what leads a lower perceived loneliness.  
(-,01 (.00)  $p < .000$ )

Young people are visiting or visited an end to have fewer friends what leads to an higher perceived loneliness.  
(,01 (.00)  $p < .000$ )

With rising age the number of friends is shrinking what leads to a higher perceived loneliness.  
(,02 (.00)  $p < .000$ )

All analyses weighted by sample weight, N=4009

# Conclusions & Limitations

- Both, life-situation-specific and life-situation-specific characteristics, directly influence the feeling of loneliness.
- On the one hand, social integration, such as membership in a club, is certainly determined by the life situation, but not only. On the other hand, an indicator for social integration like friendship seems more related to specific contexts.
- The influence of identity-related and life-phase-specific characteristics confirms the assumption that loneliness is associated with non-conformity.
- In sum, loneliness among youth and young adults can probably understood as search of social belonging in the wider society .
- Measuring the quality of social relations was (nearly) not included and needs more attention.
- Analyses with a smaller age range allow for a better depiction of life situation-specific characteristics.
- Better Measurements for loneliness and for identity-related characteristics would be helpful.

Thank you!

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