

Inequalities in access, use, and consequences of (social) media

Social exclusion, social isolation, and loneliness

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Table of contents

Preface	3
1 Introduction	4
2 Access and use of (social) media	6
3 Media usage, loneliness, and social isolation	8
4 Access and use of (social) media	10
References	12

Preface

Here you can read something about my PhD project. The Chapter [1](#) provides an overview and introduction to my topic. Chapter [2](#) deals with the unequal access to digital media. The next Chapter [3](#) deals with the question of how loneliness and social isolation are connected. The last Chapter [4](#) presents a short experiment.

You can also visit my [website](#).

1 Introduction

Loneliness, social isolation, and social exclusion are significant challenges in our society as they can be major contributors to many mental and physical health problems (Hemberg et al. 2022; Entringer et al. 2020; Reinwarth and Cihlar 2021; Qualter et al. 2015; Cacioppo and Patrick 2008). The Covid-19 pandemic in particular has raised public awareness of the issue of loneliness, as many people have had to forgo social interactions due to containment measures. So far, social science research on loneliness has mainly focused on older people, while there is limited research on feelings of loneliness, social exclusion and isolation among adolescents and young adults (Verity et al. 2022; Hemberg et al. 2022). My PhD project aims to fill this research gap and develop a better understanding of loneliness in young people, including the influence of media use. The impact of technology and social media on social isolation is an ongoing area of research that is constantly evolving. Studies have shown that excessive use of social media can have negative effects on the health of young people, but the use of social media is one of the main channels of communication (Smith, Leonis, and Anandavalli 2021). On the other hand, social media communication has an impact on real life relationships (ibid.). Conversely, there is a risk that young people who have unequal access or suffer from social isolation or loneliness may not be able to use media in the same way as their peers who are not restricted (Sarmiento et al. 2020). This leads to the overarching research question: **What impact do inequalities in access to, use of and outcomes from (social) media have on social exclusion, social isolation, and loneliness?**

Social exclusion refers to the process by which certain individuals or groups are excluded or marginalised from other members of society (Djouadi, Rössel, and Seifert 2021). Socially excluded individuals often have limited access to education, health care and suffer from a lack of social support potential (Chakravarty and D'Ambrosio 2006). Social exclusion goes beyond simple isolation and involves active exclusion from social opportunities, resources, and participation. Social isolation, on the other hand, refers to the lack of social contacts, interactions, or bonds with other people (Leigh-Hunt et al. 2017). This can be voluntary or involuntary. Thus, social exclusion aims at the active exclusion from social opportunities, while social isolation refers to the lack of interpersonal interaction and social ties. Loneliness, in contrast, is an emotional feeling that occurs when someone feels the absence of social ties or the lack of a deep connection to other people (ibid). Although loneliness and social isolation are related, they are not identical (Luhmann and Hawkey 2016). There are situations in

which people do not feel lonely even when they are alone. In contrast, people can feel lonely even when they are in the company of others (ibid.).

In the following abstract, I will present three^[1] possible research projects that can contribute to my dissertation project, which can be primarily realized within the framework of the Youth Survey Luxembourg 2024.

[1] The first two proposals are already more or less set, and the third paper is selected from the remaining three proposals.

2 Access and use of (social) media

In order to understand the connection between media use and loneliness, the first step should be to look at how young people have access to media in the first place and how they then use it. Inadequate digital equipment or lack of access to the Internet can affect a young person's ability to participate in online education, to search for information and resources, or to network with peers and like-minded people (Yates, Kirby, and Lockley 2015). These factors can affect their education, their opportunities in the labour market and their overall social inclusion (ibid.). Where there is such unequal access to the digital world, social exclusion occurs (Thege et al. 2021). People are systematically excluded because of their socio-economic background. Adolescents are a special group, as young people cannot decide about their own resources, instead they are dependent on parents, caregivers, and institutions (Goosby et al. 2013). To answer the research question: What are the systematic differences in access to and use of (social) media among young people in Luxembourg, a cluster analysis is carried out with the help of the Youth Survey Luxembourg 2024. In this context, the influence of socio-economic background, level of education, migration background, age, and household composition, among others, will be considered.

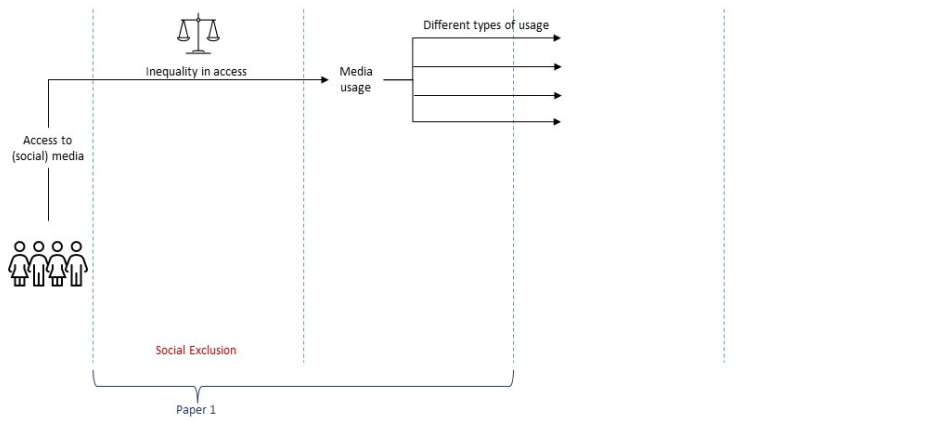


Figure 2.1: Figure 1: Graphical overview of PhD research project: First research step (Paper1).
Access and use of (social) media. Own illustration.

3 Media usage, loneliness, and social isolation

Based on the first paper, the research question “How is media use among young people related to feelings of loneliness and social isolation?” will be addressed. The effect of media use can have a positive or negative influence. Media can also be a gateway to social contact and exchange among young people (Meshi and Ellithorpe 2021; Subramanian 2017). Even if there is little or no contact with peers in the non-digital world, the individual does not have to feel lonely. If teenagers do not have the opportunity to interact in the digital or non-digital world, a high level of social isolation is created, which leads to severe negative consequences on well-being (Hämmig 2019). In addition, the connection between loneliness and social isolation should be considered and the actual number of friends should be controlled. With the help of the data from the Youth Survey Luxembourg and the media use profiles from the first paper, the research question will be examined. Possible methods would be linear or logical regression with mediators or moderator effects. Due to the cross-sectional design of the survey, self-selection effects and causality questions must be addressed.

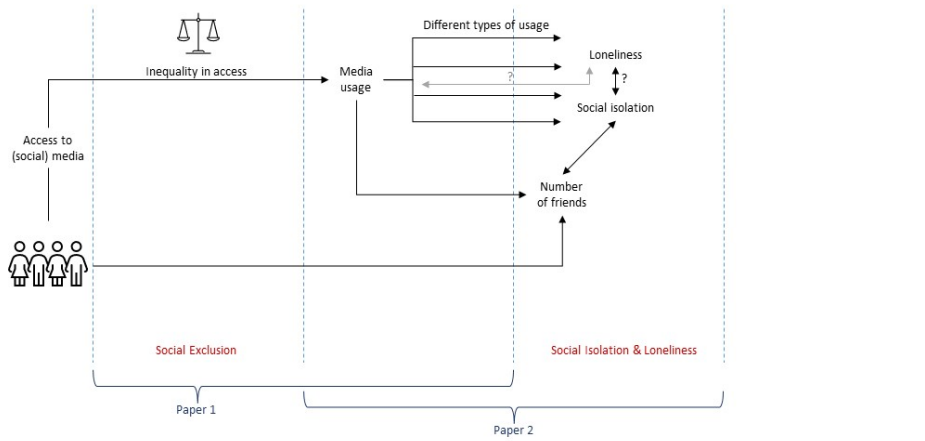


Figure 3.1: Figure 2: Graphical overview of PhD research project: Second research step (Paper 2). Media usage, loneliness, and social isolation. Own illustration.

4 Access and use of (social) media

The fourth proposal aims to address the measurement of loneliness. One of the most commonly used measures of loneliness is based on the UCLA scale. The UCLA Loneliness Scale is an instrument used to measure loneliness in individuals. It was developed by Daniel Russell and Linda Cutrona at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) (Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona 1980). The scale is available in different versions (3 items, 4 items, 8 items and 20 items) with different response options. There is a broad body of research on the validity of the different versions (Mund 2022). However, no scale has yet investigated the influence of the introductory text of the question. The above-mentioned survey YAC 2021 used the UCLA version as shown in Table 4.1. The adaptation in the introductory text: “In the last 12 months” is not included in the original versions of the loneliness scale (Schomaker, Residori, and Samuel 2022). Also, most surveys and other studies do not use an introductory text with a time reference (Mund 2022; Luhmann and Hawkley 2016; Hawkley et al. 2016). For example, the German SOEP uses “How often do you...” (Goebel et al. 2023). This leads to the question: What is the influence of the requested observation period on the UCLA Loneliness Scale on the response behaviour of young people? In order to be able to answer this question, a survey experiment will be conducted within the framework of the Youth Survey Luxembourg 2024, in which respondents will be randomised to answer the YAC 2021 version or the treatment Table 4.1. With the help of group comparisons and structural equation models, the influence of the treatment will then be measured.

Table 4.1: Comparison of the measurement of loneliness UCLA adaptation and treatment scale

YAC 2021 adaption of UCLA (4 Items)	Treatment
In the last 12 months, how often have you felt as described in each of the following statements?	How often have you felt as described in each of the following statements?
I feel isolated from others	I feel isolated from others
I feel excluded	I feel excluded
I lack companionship	I lack companionship
I am no longer close to anyone	I am no longer close to anyone

YAC 2021 adaption of UCLA (4 Items)	Treatment
a. Never, b. Occasionally, c. Less than half the time, d. More than half the time, e. Most of the time.	a. Never, b. Occasionally, c. Less than half the time, d. More than half the time, e. Most of the time.

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