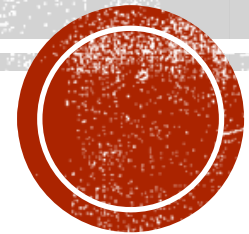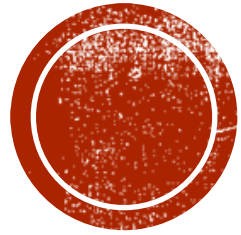# BUILDING CONNECTION FOR ADULTS

Ryan A. McKelley, Ph.D., LP, HSP

Psychology Department

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
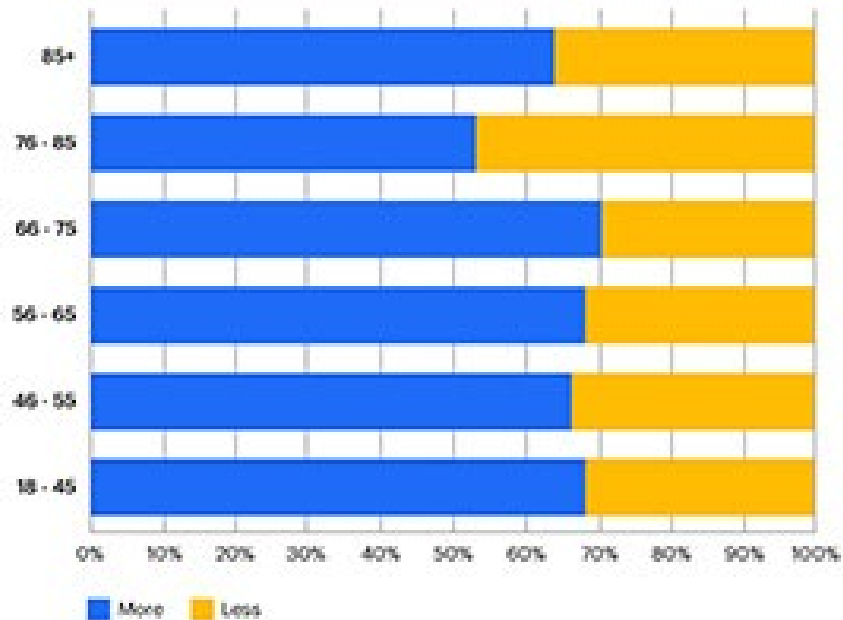
DISAGGREGATING THE DATA
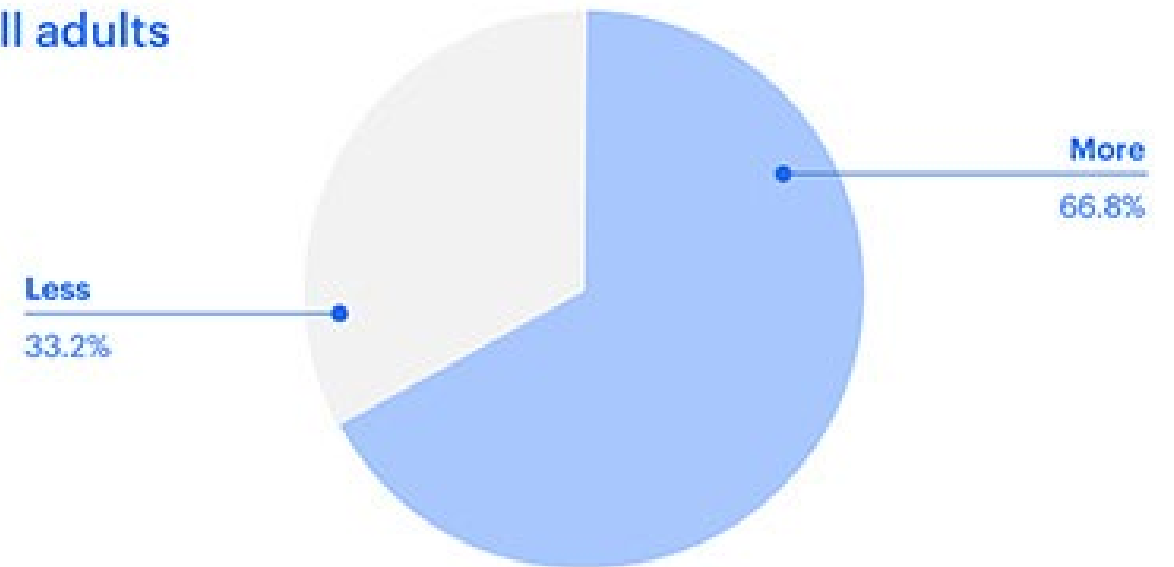
Impact of social identities of adults during the pandemic

THE BIG PICTURE

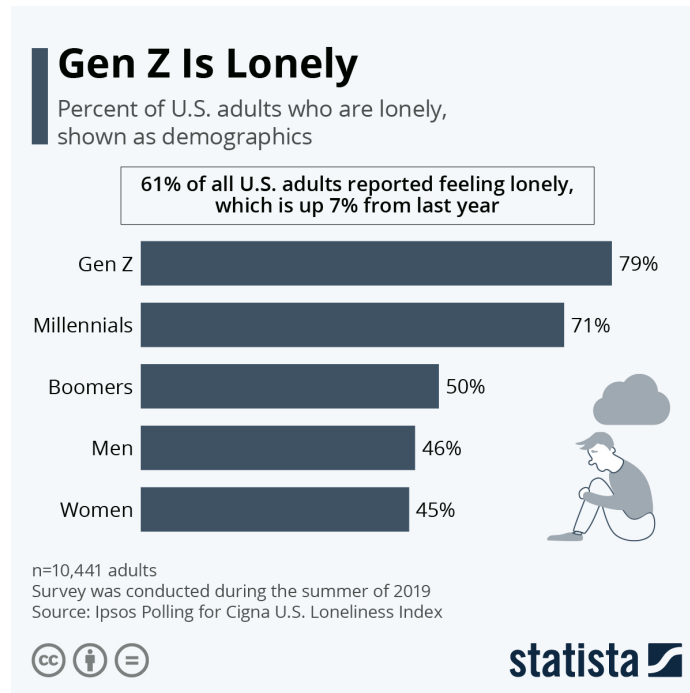## Would you say you are more or less lonely now than you were before the pandemic?

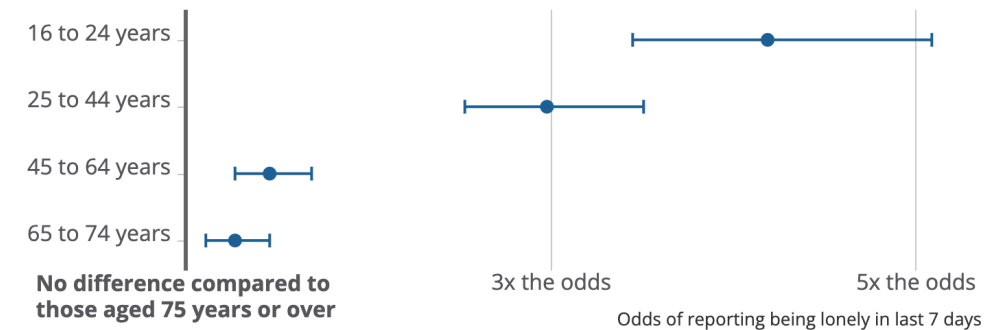Source: Rubin, 2022

LONELINESS & AGE

Before pandemic

Gen Z Is Lonely
Percent of U.S. adults who are lonely, shown as demographics

61% of all U.S. adults reported feeling lonely, which is up 7% from last year

Gen Z	79%
Millennials	71%
Boomers	50%
Men	46%
Women	45%

n=10,441 adults
Survey was conducted during the summer of 2019
Source: Ipsos Polling for Cigna U.S. Loneliness Index

statista

During 2ⁿᵈ year of pandemic

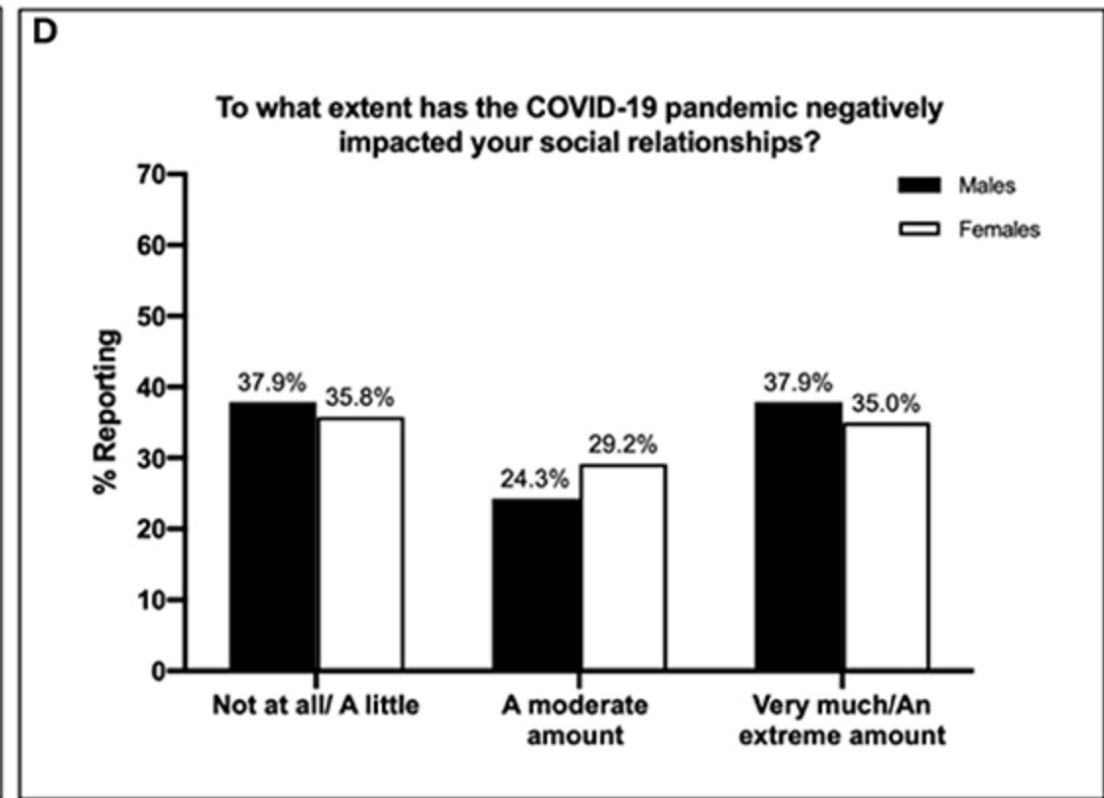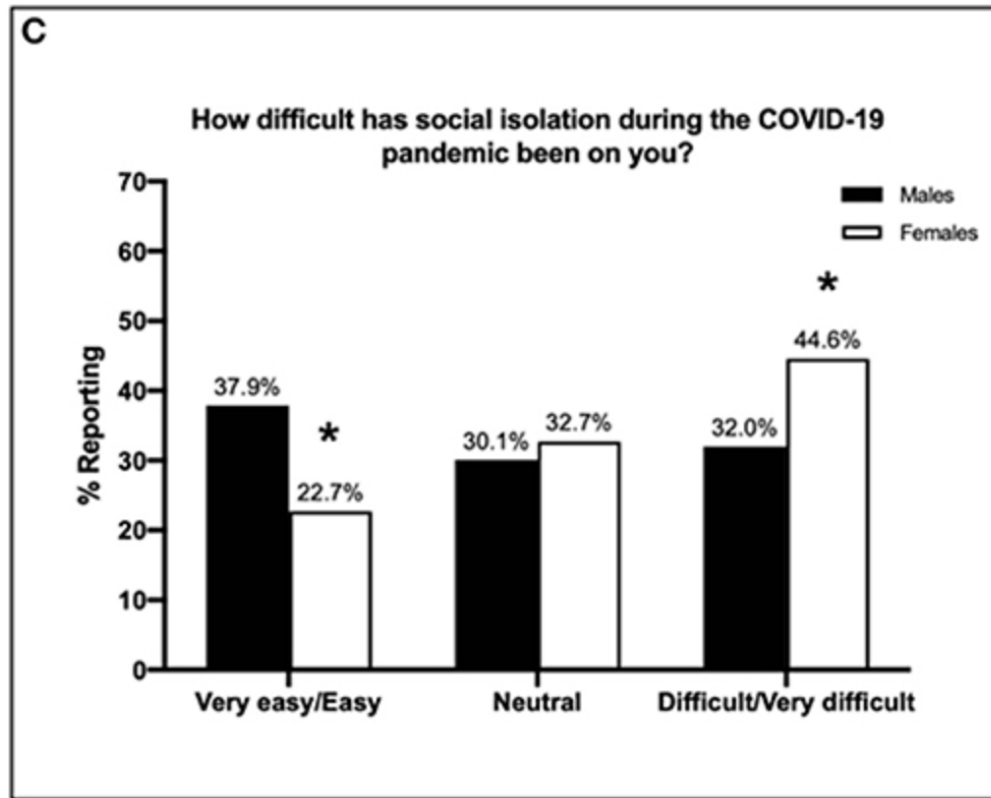**Younger people were more likely to experience "lockdown loneliness"**

Odds of reporting feeling lonely in last 7 days, of people who said their well-being was affected by the coronavirus, Great Britain, 14 October 2020 to 22 February 2021.

16 to 24 years	
25 to 44 years	
45 to 64 years	
65 to 74 years	

No difference compared to those aged 75 years or over

3x the odds   5x the odds

Odds of reporting being lonely in last 7 days

Source: Office for National Statistics - Opinions and Lifestyle Survey

Source: Office for National Statistics, 2021

GENDER

C — How difficult has social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic been on you?

	Males	Females
Very easy/Easy	37.9%	22.7% *
Neutral	30.1%	32.7%
Difficult/Very difficult	32.0%	44.6% *

D — To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted your social relationships?

	Males	Females
Not at all/ A little	37.9%	35.8%
A moderate amount	24.3%	29.2%
Very much/An extreme amount	37.9%	35.0%

Source: Prowse et al., 2021

RACE & ETHNICITY
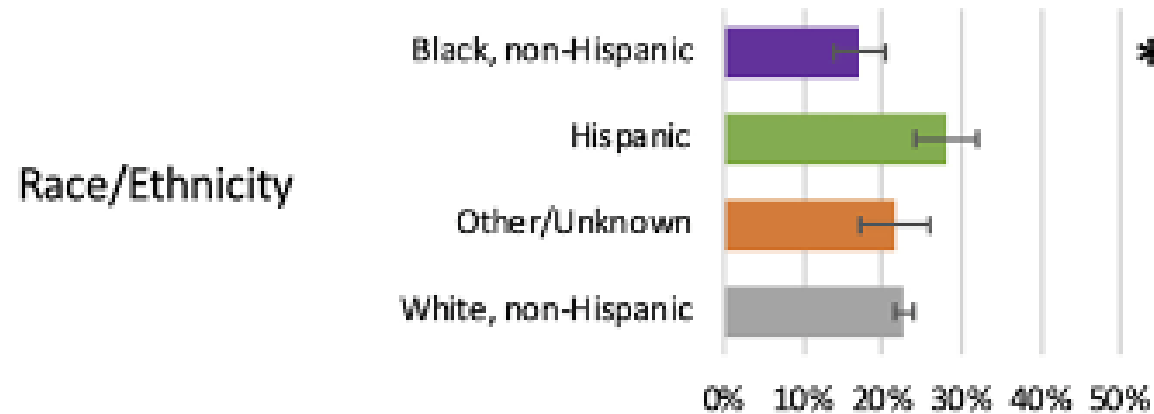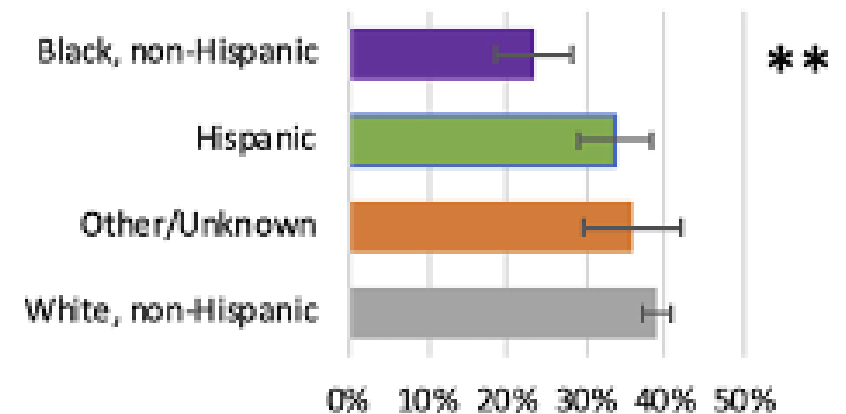
Source: Holaday et al., 2021

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

**Higher unemployment in an area was linked to higher loneliness rates**

Correlation between latest unemployment rates (October 2019 to September 2020) and "often or always" feeling lonely (October 2020 to February 2020) in Great Britain

Unemployment rate (%)

People reporting often or always lonely (%)
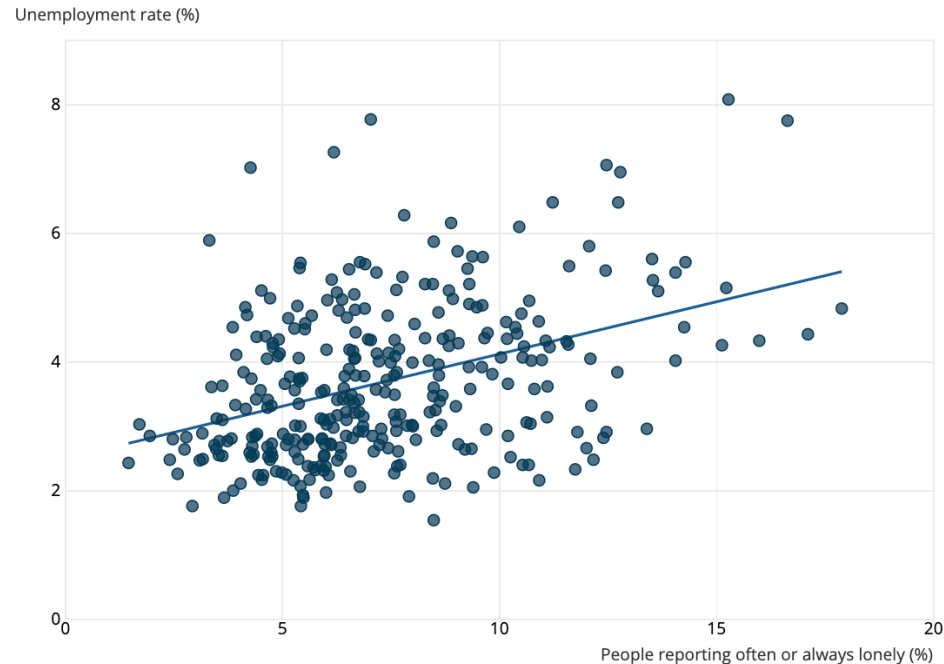
We've Become a lot Lonelier

More years of education correlates with less social isolation. This effect has become pronounced over time.

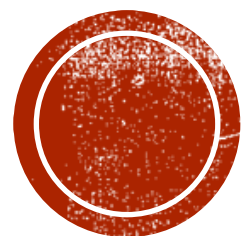Social Isolation vs Years of Education

2004   1985

Probability of Social Isolation

Years of Education
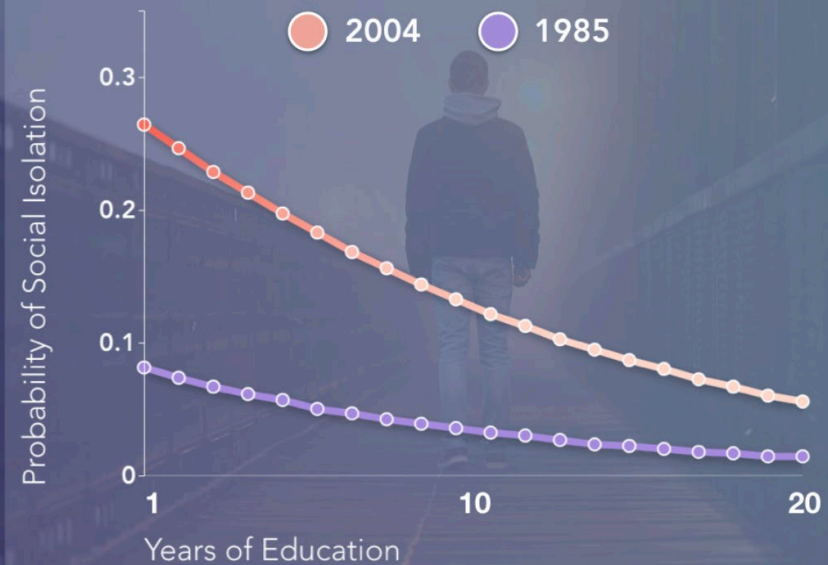
McPherson et al

Source: Office for National Statistics, 2021; Clearvue Health, 2019

PRE-PANDEMIC PREDICTORS OF LONELINESS

PERSONALITY CORRELATES FOR LONELINESS

Risk Factors (Increase Risk)

- Neuroticism
- Trait and state anger
- Perfectionism
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Stress
- Poor physical health

Protective Factors (Decrease Risk)

- Extraversion
- Conscientiousness
- Hours spent with friends
- Social support
- Job and/or home competence
- Purpose in life

Source: Mansour et al., 2021

WORLD HAPPINESS REPORT: SOCIAL CONNECTION & LONELINESS DURING COVID-19

Figure 6.1: Psychological well-being during COVID-19

	PROTECTIVE FACTORS	RISK FACTORS
Psychological	**Positive psychological characteristics:** Gratitude, resilience, grit, flow **Personality:** Extraversion	**Intolerance for uncertainty** **Pre-existing mental health conditions:** Clinical diagnosis of depression, anxiety, & others
Social	**Quality of relationships** **Connectedness, positivity resonance** **Quantity of relationships:** Larger social networks **Prosocial behavior**	**Engaging in distancing** **Quality of relationships:** Loneliness, poor social support, abuse **Types of relationships:** Parent, child
Time Use	**Social media use** **Daily activities:** Physical activity, time outdoors	**Social media use** **Online news sources:** Consulting more sources, more time spent consulting sources
Circumstantial	**Demographic factors:** Older age	**Demographic factors:** Disease risk factors, occupation type **Vulnerable groups:** Financial insecurity, food insecurity, lower SES

Figure 6.2: Social connection and loneliness during COVID-19

	PROTECTIVE FACTORS	RISK FACTORS
Psychological	**Pre-existing mental health conditions**	**Personality:** Extraversion **Pre-existing mental health conditions:** Clinical diagnosis of depression, anxiety, & others
Social	**Engaging in distancing** **Features of household:** Living with a partner **Types of relationships:** Family, friends, pets **Prosocial behavior**	**Engaging in distancing** **Features of the household:** Living alone
Time Use	**Using digital media to connect:** If used to cope with loneliness **Daily activities:** Spending more time with family & friends	**Using digital media to connect:** No access to internet/digital inequality
Circumstantial	**Demographic factors:** Older age	**Demographic factors:** Occupation type, older age **Vulnerable groups:** Chronically ill, children, disadvantaged groups

Source:
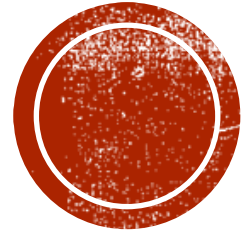
PROMISE OR PERIL OF TECH-MEDIATED CONNECTION?

RISE IN SOCIAL & DIGITAL MEDIA USE
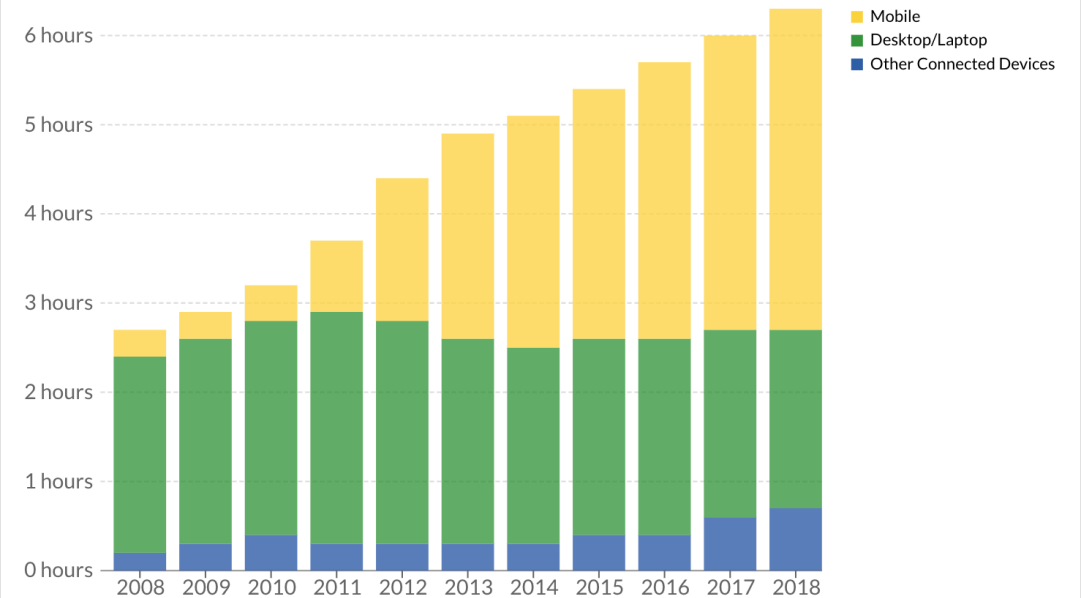
Source: Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2020

THE SMARTPHONE GENERATION: A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT
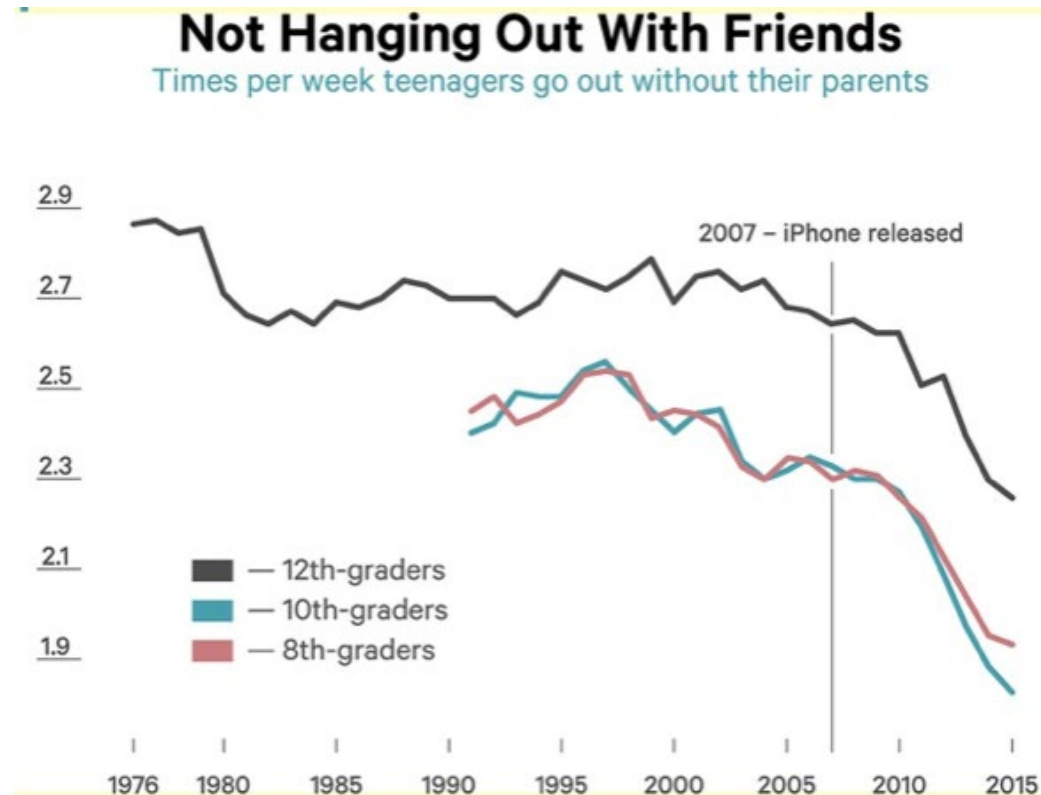
Not Hanging Out With Friends
Times per week teenagers go out without their parents

2007 – iPhone released

- 12th-graders
- 10th-graders
- 8th-graders

Source: *The Atlantic,* 2017

THE SMARTPHONE GENERATION: A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT

In No Rush to Drive
Percentage of 12th-graders who drive

2007 – iPhone released

— Drove at all in the past year
— Have a driver's license

Source: *The Atlantic,* 2017

THE SMARTPHONE GENERATION: A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT

Less Dating ...
Percentage of teenagers who ever go out on dates

Source: *The Atlantic,* 2017

THE SMARTPHONE GENERATION: A STATISTICAL PORTRAIT

More Likely to Feel Lonely

Percentage of 8th-, 10th-, and 12th-graders who agree or mostly agree with the statement "I often feel left out of things" or "A lot of times I feel lonely"

2007 – iPhone released

— Often feel left out
— Often feel lonely
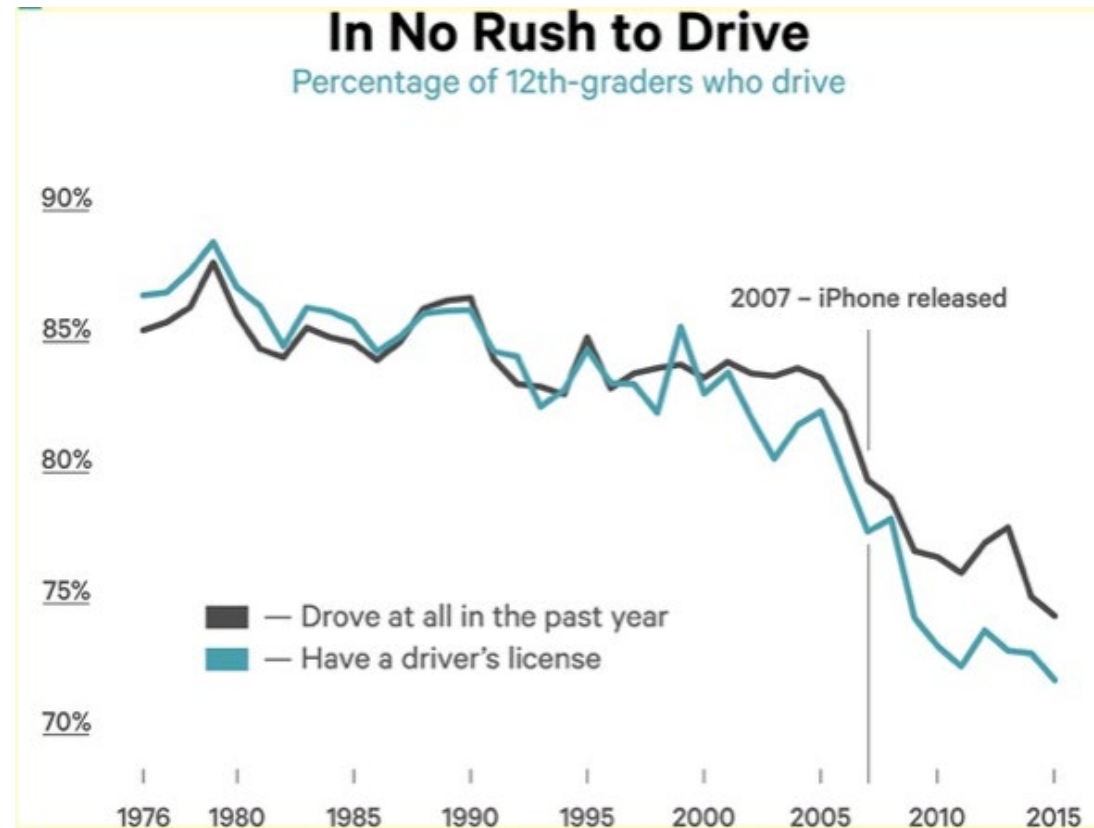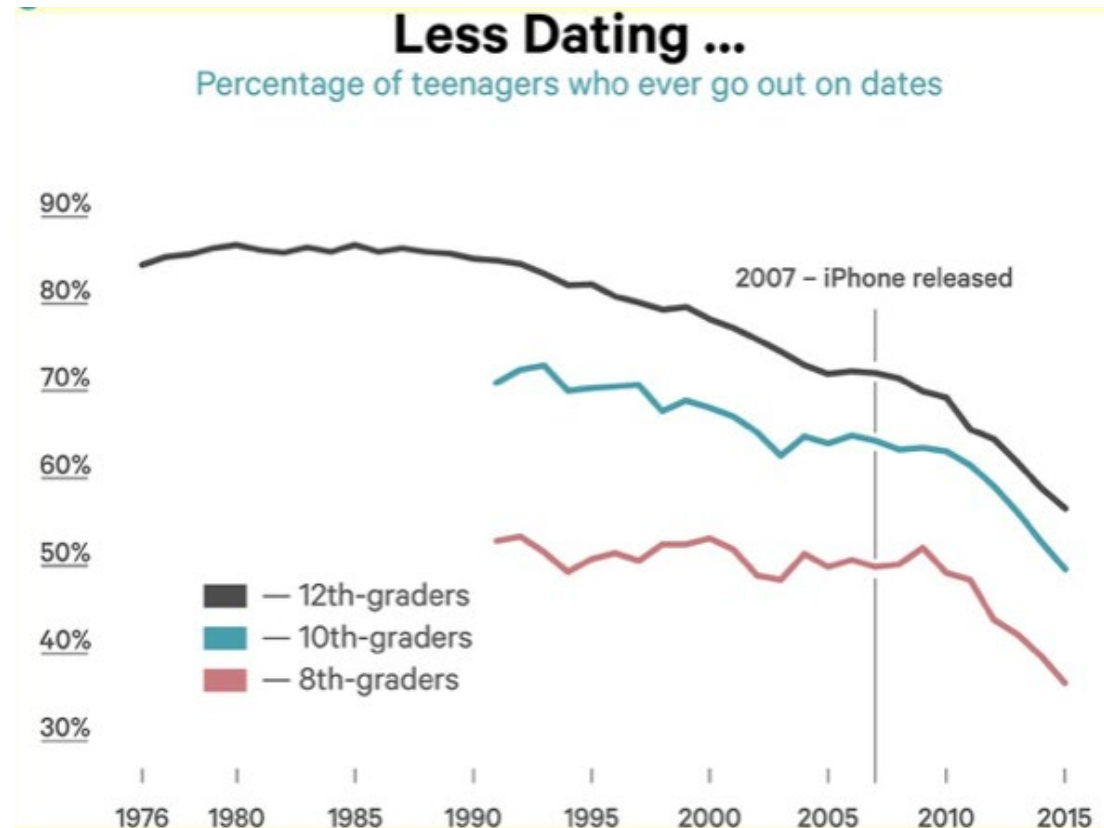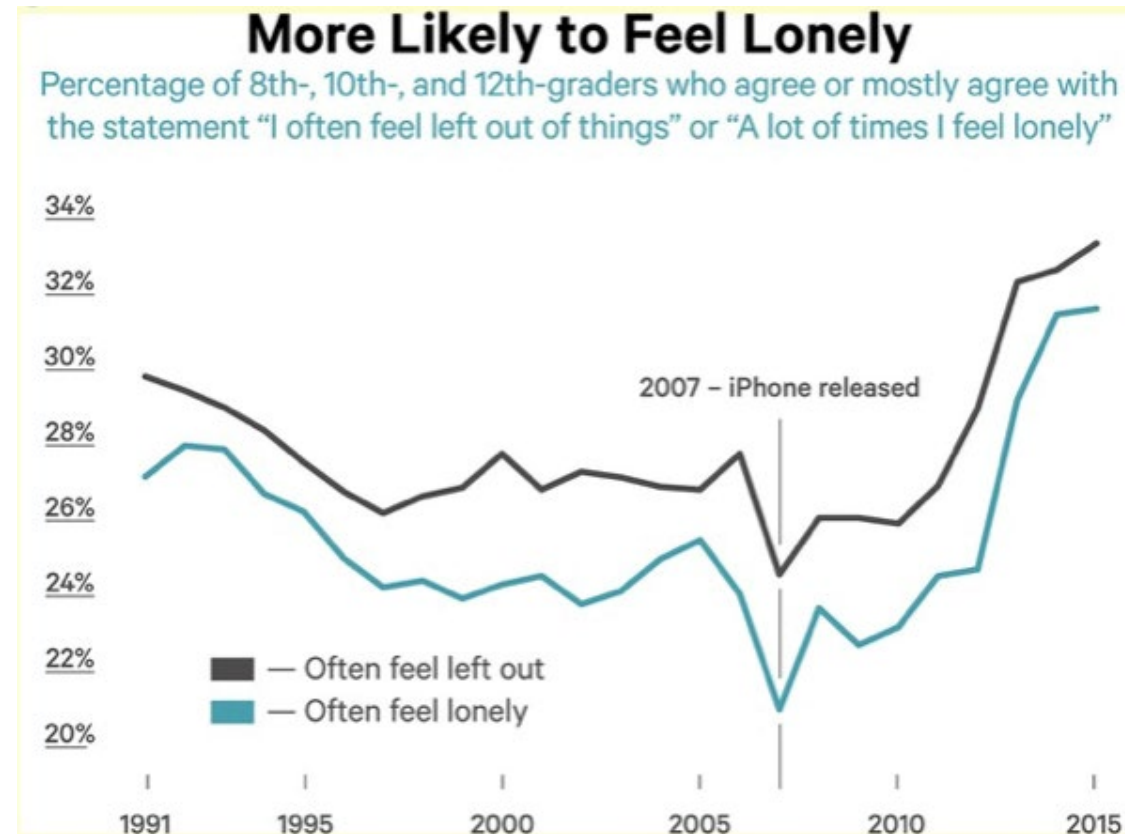
Source: *The Atlantic,* 2017

BUT...IT'S COMPLICATED

Source: Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2020

Time spent on social media and communication apps

The average time spent on different social media apps for users who said they were happy with the amount of time they spent on them, compared to the average time for those who said they were unhappy. Moment – an app that lets users track their screen time – asked: "Are you happy with your time spent?"

Our World in Data

App	Happy with screen time	Unhappy with screen time
Snapchat	32 mins	1 hour
Youtube	28 mins	68 mins
Instagram	28 mins	57 mins
WhatsApp	26 mins	57 mins
Skype	26 mins	28 mins
Reddit	25 mins	65 mins
Facetime	21 mins	40 mins
Facebook	18 mins	47 mins
Twitter	18 mins	44 mins
Tumblr	17 mins	34 mins
Messenger	13 mins	31 mins
Pinterest	10 mins	24 mins
Tinder	10 mins	17 mins
Mail	8 mins	14 mins
Slack	8 mins	14 mins
LinkedIn	8 mins	9 mins

Average daily time spent on each app

Survey data asked thousands of users (mostly in the USA & Europe) a simple yes or no question on different social media apps: "Are you happy with your time spent?".
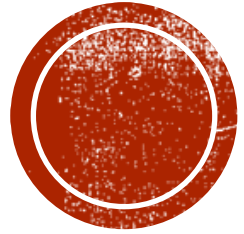Data source: Moment App Survey results via Internet Health Report (2018).

SOME BENEFITS OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

1. Breaks the ice with new relationships
2. Allows you to keep in touch with people far away
3. Delivers instant notification of important events
4. Helps build friendships
5. Accesses diversity of opinion
6. Relieves stress

Source: Price-Mitchell, 2014

A FEW STRATEGIES FOR CONNECTION IN ADULTS

- "If every person who's in pretty good shape can make a commitment to reaching out to one person they are concerned might be lonely once a week, that would be a good thing."
  - Richard Weissbourd, psychologist at the Harvard Graduate School of Education

TAKE INVENTORY

- Reflect on our own and others' social connections
  - Try the "Create Your Personal Sociogram" resource from the Summit

- Social comfort pre- and post-COVID isolation
  - Give yourself compassion for being rusty, and try "The Social Connection Planner" resource from the Summit

- Talk about social connection with others

CHECK YOUR [TECH]SELF

- Take one week to explore your own social and digital media use
  - Who? (or with Whom?)
  - What?
  - When?
  - Where?
  - Why?

- Consider apps like Screen Time to collect data across sites

- BONUS: Ask your family, friends, and colleagues about their perceptions of your use

USE BRIGHT LINES FOR TECH

- Practice mindfulness to learn what drives social media use (e.g., escape anxiety, boredom, etc.)

- No phones while out on date/meal/walking

- Identify ways tech can SUPPORT or expand existing connections

- Model boundaries in your use
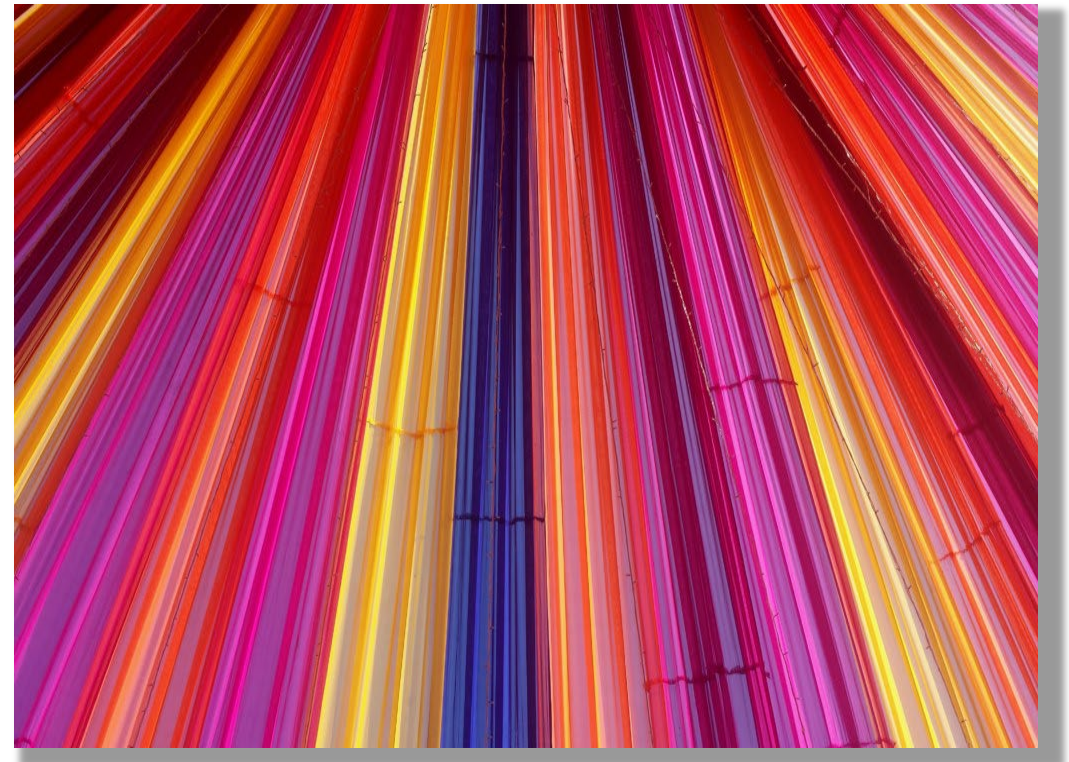
OR...

Whatever works for you!

- Ex. Phone calls, journaling, writing letters, texting, video meetings, social distancing gatherings, gaming apps w/ friends, religious practices, volunteering, etc.

BUILD SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- Doctors' offices: Ask about loneliness

- PK–12 schools: Relationship mapping

- Colleges and universities: More deliberate student-staff opportunities

- Senior centers: Multi-generational activities

- Workplaces: Check in more deliberately

- City agencies: Promote existing opportunities for connection

- Federal, state, and local service opportunities: More organized volunteer service opportunities to connect communities

Source: Weissbourd et al., 2021