

The Social Life of High School Seniors: COVID Experiences

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 marks a time of social isolation and social change in the lives of many people. While previous literature has focused on the mental health consequences of isolation on young people, our qualitative research aims to explore the lived experiences of adolescents during the pandemic. Based on 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with senior year students at the John F. Kennedy School in Berlin, this study seeks to determine whether both the government and school-imposed COVID-measures have impacted the social lives of our participants and to understand how they experience these potential changes. Our research found that students report a significant change in social life, but, in contrast with the existing literature, their experience of this social change is perceived as positive. These positive changes included a reported improvement in social connections, a more conscious use of social media, and the potential for more alone time. By exploring these three themes, our participants' unexpected positivity can be placed into a larger context in which the pandemic is an opportunity to forge more meaningful connections while learning to be more conscious in spending time alone in an "always-on" culture.

Keywords: adolescents; COVID-19; social life; aloneness; social media

mandatory masks, social distancing in classrooms, and the separation of floors by grades.

Based on the reported experiences of students, our research aims to find out whether these COVID-measures have impacted the social lives of our participants and to understand how they experience these changes. Through our interviews, we found that the pandemic has caused a change in social life, but, in contrast with the existing literature, the students' experience of this social change is rather positive. Therefore, the data analysis mainly focuses on explaining this surprising outcome. Through an exploration of three themes: social connections, social media, and alone time, we delve deeper into our participants' unexpected positivity towards the pandemic. Finally, we summarize our main findings and address the limitations of this study and suggestions for further research.

Methodology

We took an exploratory and inductive approach to our research, meaning that we allowed our interviewees' experiences to lead our research questions (Gray 2014, 43-4, 62). Since the COVID-pandemic is a novel situation, there are a limited number of sources currently available that deal with its effects, especially on the specific population of high school students. As a result, our study focuses on the individual experiences of these students in an attempt to best understand their situation and attitudes towards the pandemic. Various authors have already shown the merits of ethnographic and qualitative methods for exploring and understanding the experiences of adolescents (eg. Marwick and Boyd 2014, 1055-56). Our decision to examine individual stories is justified through our constructivist epistemology. We take the subjective experiences of our participants to be socially constructed, but not completely separate from an objective reality (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006, 48). Without assuming that reality exists simply to be uncovered, we take a more phenomenological approach to answering our research question by examining how the world is perceived by our interviewees. Building on the same principles as Throuvala et al. (2018, 166) and Marwick and Boyd (2014, 1055), our

Coronavirus social-contact curbs put adolescents at risk" (Roxby 2020, 1); "COVID-19 has affected mental health of 40% of teenagers" (Dupont 2020, 1); "Future of an entire generation at risk" (United Nations 2020, 1). Headlines such as these have been plaguing the media, warning us of the effects of the pandemic on the lives of young people. Adolescents are reported as being at risk for countless mental and physical health issues as a result of the lockdown restrictions. The area where these new rules arguably have the most impact is in the social aspects of life, but how exactly the pandemic has influenced this and in what way young people themselves experience these social changes remains largely unknown.

Our research poses the following research question: How do senior year students at the John F. Kennedy High School (JFKS) in Berlin shape and experience their social lives during the COVID-19 pandemic? The JFKS is a public German-American school situated in the district of Zehlendorf, one of the richest neighborhoods in Berlin, Germany. Albeit not a private school, JFKS is ranked as one of the best public schools in Berlin and is funded by both the German and American governments via the JFKS Trust Fund (John F. Kennedy School: Structure). Thus, many of its students come from international, mostly middle and upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds. Germany, like many other European countries, has implemented rules and regulations in order to prevent the COVID-19 virus from spreading further. These restrictions mainly focus on minimizing contact between people to prevent infection (Deutschland.de 2021). At the time of our interviews, the JFKS students attended most of their classes in person with certain COVID regulations in place, including the use of

research focuses on understanding individual experiences instead of aiming to make generalizations and is therefore idiographic in design. The specific method we apply throughout the research can be described as a grounded theory approach to thematic analysis as presented by Heydarian (2016, 2). Within this context, the different components of research, such as the literature review, data collection and data analysis, are developed simultaneously and in close relation to one another (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006, 348).

With this idea in mind, we conducted 10 one-on-one interviews with senior (grade 12) students at the John F. Kennedy school in Berlin., and pseudonyms are used in this study. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted 30-45 minutes each. The purpose of the questions posed was threefold: to understand the current situations of the participants both in school and their personal lives, to chart the changes that they noticed in their social lives as a result of the pandemic and, most importantly, to explore how they experienced these changes. The specific questions differed from interview to interview as we continually reflected upon our focus and preliminary findings. Based on the answers we received from the students, we identified certain topics that were interesting or controversial and, in the following interviews, we delved deeper into those. Similarly, questions and subjects that did not yield results relevant for this research were focused upon less in subsequent interviews, and in some cases left out.

We specifically interviewed senior year students from the same high school using snowball sampling, which means that they are acquainted with one another to varying degrees (Gray 2014, 249-50). Their demographics are also quite similar: aged 17-18 years, middle to high socio-economic background, similar education level, and a general acknowledgement that the COVID-19 virus is a serious problem. Since social experiences may differ due to varying COVID-19 regulations, choosing participants from the same school and year ensures that an analysis of the experiences could still lead to comparable results within our specific sample. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, including repetitions, stuttering and other small

utterances, as these can be meaningful on their own (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006, 345-6). We then read these transcriptions and started an open coding process, highlighting passages that were relevant for the research question, recurred throughout the interviews, and were in any other way significant. From these initial codes we wrote several larger analytical memos in a similar manner to the coding method used for grounded theory research as presented in Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006, 349-353). Following the development of our memos, we synthesized these findings into three distinct themes to create a coherent narrative and compared the results with those of previous research. This ensures that our findings are situated in an academic context and establish an appropriately contextualized understanding of the matter at hand.

Isolation, Loneliness, and Social Media Use in Adolescence

Although research on the effects of the novel COVID-19 pandemic is currently limited, previous studies have attempted to understand the social impacts of natural disasters. For example, in his research on the Chicago heat wave of 1995, Klinenberg (2001) attempts to understand the impact of social isolation on senior citizens. He concludes that many deaths were caused not by the heat wave itself, but by the social isolation and fear of possible health risks that resulted from the natural disaster (2001, 524). Thus, Klinenberg connects the impacts of natural disasters with psycho-social wellbeing, demonstrating the dangers of isolation. Although we acknowledge that the pandemic has consequences for all age groups, we chose to focus our research on high school seniors specifically since these are already in developmentally important phases of their lives. Therefore, as our study focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on young people, it is important to understand how a younger age group may be impacted by social isolation, since this may differ from the results of Klinenberg's research. An ethnographic study was recently conducted with Pakistani university students investigating their reflections on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Raza et. al. 2021). The researchers requested the participants to capture photos

that reflect the impact of the pandemic on various aspects of their lives. By collecting 120 photographs with corresponding captions, the researchers were able to uncover various themes about the experiences of these students. Among these were feelings of isolation, fear of infection, and heightened anxiety and uncertainty (Raza et al. 2021, 118-119). Thus, their findings seem to fall in line with those of Klinenberg (2001) in that isolation can lead to added stress and feelings of loneliness. It is important to note, however, that Raza et al. (2021) conducted their study on a sample of university students, who also differ from high school students in certain aspects. The impacts on high schoolers, which is under scrutiny in this research, is therefore important to explore.

A letter to the editor of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* includes various possible implications that the COVID pandemic might have for high school students (Thakur 2020). These implications largely entail concerns about fear of infection and other mental health-related topics, especially due to the loss of social interaction as a result of COVID-19 restrictions (Thakur 2020, 1309). Specifically, Davis (2013, 2283) found that interpersonal relationships have a very large influence on identity formation in adolescents. Additionally, a review paper analyzing multiple articles about social isolation and loneliness in adolescents found that these factors increase the risk of depression and anxiety (Loades et al. 2020, 1218). As a result, adolescents, mainly those with existing mental health problems, low socioeconomic status and other disadvantages, can be considered a risk group for psychological problems (Fegert et al. 2020, 4). This is especially the case during the pandemic, since adolescents are in a time of life where there is an overall need for increased social interaction (Orben et al. 2020, 635).

When looking specifically at the potential effects the pandemic may have on adolescents, a common theme found in many recent studies is the heightened risk of feelings of loneliness. Pietrabissa and Simpson (2020, 1) define social isolation as an "objective lack of interactions with others" and acknowledge that prolonged periods of isolation can result in a plethora of

mental health problems, including depression. According to Besser, Flett and Zeigler-Hill (2020, 2), these uncertain times create additional stress and anxiety for students. Since young people are forced to be socially isolated, the pandemic does not allow for many in-person social activities that would previously help relieve this stress. Rather, adolescents must spend an increased amount of time isolated at home (Besser et al. 2020, 2). A study conducted in Switzerland includes self-reported surveys with people of all ages claiming that social isolation causes an increase in physical and mental illness. Thus, the more socially isolated the participants are, the higher the risk for worse mental and physical health problems (Hämmig 2019, 14).

While many studies emphasize the risks of social isolation during the pandemic, we also found that the quality of social connections is an important factor to take into consideration. According to Besser, Flett and Zeigler-Hill (2020, 17), our sense of self is shaped by our feelings of belonging within our social circles. Thus, the more we feel that we belong to a social group and matter to others, the stronger our sense of self and the more resilient and adaptable we are in times of crisis, such as the current pandemic. This claim is supported by Pietrabissa and Simpson (2020, 3) who found that human resilience is closely linked to the depth and strength of our interpersonal connections. Although Besser et al. (2020, 1) specifically researched higher education students' ability to adapt to online learning during the COVID pandemic, they found that those who felt a strong feeling of social connectedness within their social circles had better moods. Therefore, to counter feelings of loneliness, feeling socially connected really matters (Banerjee & Rai 2020, 526-527). Thus, these studies create a very important link between the quality rather than the quantity of social connections and how these affect our ability to be resilient in times of great change while countering certain mental health risks.

Being isolated at home does not necessarily imply having no social interaction whatsoever. Social media plays an increasingly large role in our lives, especially for younger generations and can serve as a way to decrease the impact of the loss of face-to-face interactions (Orben et

al. 2020, 637). As a result of the pandemic, therefore, time spent on social media can be expected to increase drastically, making this aspect of daily life extremely relevant for our research. In particular, the consequences of increased social media use are an important factor to take into account. Davis (2013, 2290) identifies the role social media platforms play in shaping ideas and identities for adolescents, and research by Ehrenreich et al. (2019, 534-35) concludes that simply texting already influences key developmental stages during adolescence, such as establishing autonomy from parents and developing self-identity and meaningful peer relations. This shows that seemingly mundane digital interactions can have a great impact on the identity and self-perception of high school students. Additionally, a study by Mazzone and Iannone (2014, 310) found that the specific uses of social networking sites and the motivations behind them are influenced by whether the adolescents in question are high school or university students, as the former experience more pressure to participate. Throuvala et al. (2018, 168) identify the Fear of Missing Out (FoMo) as one of the prevalent issues in social media, meaning that students feel pressure to be active and present both on and offline. Next to generally feeling bad about being left out of social activities, this feeling may cause young people to feel pressure to join parties or bigger events at a time when COVID-19 regulations currently advise against these. This could contribute to the stress and anxiety which social media in general has been found to exacerbate (Throuvala et al. 2018, 172). Overall, the literature points at multiple social and psychological implications of increased social media use for adolescents during the pandemic.

Shaping Social Life and the Unforeseen Positive Impacts of COVID-19

As mentioned previously, our main points of inquiry throughout the student interviews revolved around three main topics: the loss of social connection with peers, how our interviewees experience this loss and deal with the time spent alone, and their relation to social media as an important aspect of social life during the pandemic. Much of the

aforementioned literature suggests that we would encounter negative experiences, including reports of loneliness, lack of social interactions and an increase in potentially damaging social media use. Indeed, our interviewees do report significant social changes in their lives since the start of the pandemic. The biggest change seems to be a social downscaling, as Eric exemplifies: "... just hanging out with like, a bigger group of friends, especially, it's hard if you have like, a lot of mutual friends that used to hang out before COVID. And now you're trying to like split it down into smaller groups."

As the restrictions prohibit meeting in large groups outside or at home, the physical social interactions of our interviewees have been diminished to mostly one-on-one activities, such as going for walks or doing sports. The only place where large amounts of people come together is at school, but our interviewees tell us that even there the situation has changed profoundly. As Nicole describes: "it's kind of...so we don't really have like one place where everyone gathers, which is a change so it's kind of just smaller groups that are talking within the halls so I think, yeah, that's a change." The situation presented by our interviewees highlights a transformation of the social situation prior to the start of the pandemic. Our interviewees mention that the most noticeable difference is no longer being able to casually hang out with multiple friends and randomly meet people at parties and other larger social events. Now, both inside and outside of the context of school, social interactions are happening less and on a smaller scale.

These observations regarding social interactions seem to line up with our literature findings. Additionally, our interviewees report that their use of online social platforms has increased considerably since the start of the pandemic. However, the correspondence between our findings and the literature seem to only match to a certain degree. Although our participants all acknowledge that the pandemic has changed aspects of their social lives, their overall attitude towards the new developments is surprisingly positive rather than negative. Carla provides a clear example of this unexpected discovery by saying that "it [the pandemic] really impacted social life and, you

know, not being able to meet up with a group of people, not being able to go to parties,” while she at the same time claims the following: “Like, I can still do a lot of things that aren’t restricted, like, the restrictions don’t really take away like a lot of things that I want to be doing... I wouldn’t say that the restrictions really impacted me in a negative way.”

All of the other interviewees, to our initial surprise, share this opinion. Marie even went so far as to say that if she could go back in time and undo the pandemic, she would not necessarily do so. As this discovery does not fall in line with the literature we encountered, we decided to adapt the focus of our research to better understand this interesting contradiction. Taking this unexpected positivity as the central discovery of our research, in the remaining interviews, we set out to unpack our participants’ experiences regarding the pandemic.

Quality of Friendships and Resilience in Times of Social Change

Our first theme delves deeper into the friendships the students maintained during the pandemic. As discussed above, our participants report that they are spending less time with big groups of friends and missing out on large-scale social activities. Consequently, this may affect adolescents the most since they find themselves in a stage of life where these frequent and large social interactions are a crucial component in their identity formation and mental health (Orben et al. 2020, 635; Davis 2013, 2283). However, rather than emphasizing this change as a negative consequence of the pandemic, every single interviewee reported that the COVID-19 restrictions allowed them to create a stronger ‘inner circle’ of friends that they interact with regularly. Marie, for instance, reported that:

I actually got into more contact with some other people that I'm not as close with just because, you know... Stuff's happening, you text each other about something and then you end up meeting up when you can. So I actually probably

gained a couple more friends than I lost friends during these times.

Not only did friendships change, the *quality* of these friendships and the inner circles greatly improved, which many participants, such as Carla, attribute directly to the pandemic:

I think it [the pandemic] really brought out like, who, I don't wanna say cared about you, but to an extent kind of like, you would see who was reaching out and who you reached out to. And that really like, like, shined a light on like, who's important in your life and who like the really good true friends are.

Carla echoed the responses of many interviewees—that the pandemic actually brought to the surface who her ‘good’ and ‘true’ friends are, bringing her closer than ever before to the friends who care most about her. Thus, while the participants point out that their immediate circles of friends reduced in size and they are no longer able to go to large social events, their experience of this change is phrased in a positive way, since they emphasize that it brought them closer to their friends and helped them understand who is truly important to them.

Another interesting trend we uncovered in the reflections of our participants is their inability to recall specific changes in their social life and their apparent indifference towards these changes. When asked to describe what their social interactions were like prior to the pandemic, oftentimes our interviewees had a very difficult time recalling these. Many students struggled to remember when exactly these changes occurred and what differences these made in their daily social lives. When asked about when the COVID measurements were put into place, Anna struggled to remember exclaiming, “My god, it's so crazy I'm so used to the thing [wearing a mask] now that I can't even remember.” Nicole echoed Anna’s inability to recall what it was like before by stating “I really can't remember a time before this [the pandemic], actually.” This inability to recall a time prior to the pandemic suggests that most of our interviewees display a certain ability to adapt to this social change and this new social “norm.”

Since our participants were able to strengthen their friendships and create 'inner circles' of people they could share their grievances with and find solace in, this could explain why they were able to adapt so quickly to the new social changes and thus rapidly forget what the social situation was like prior to the pandemic. Our findings seem to support those of Pietrabissa and Simpson (2020, 3) and Besser et al. (2020, 17) who found that the more one feels connected to and finds a sense of belonging with others, the more resilient and able one is to adapt to new situations. Interestingly, Raza et al. (2021, 119) also found contradictory findings as they concluded that "[t]he lockdown has affected some relationships negatively but simultaneously it has also benefitted other relationships." Our interviewees echoed these findings in that they were able to grow closer to certain friends, whilst also letting go of relationships they cherished less. The strong social connections described by our participants may also explain why our findings counter those of several studies such as Hämmig (2019, 14) who claims that social isolation leads to more loneliness and mental health risks. Since our participants were all able to create meaningful social connections as a result of the pandemic, this strengthened their ability to adapt and find comfort in their friends during this time of change, hence avoiding the risks of mental health problems and other negative consequences of social isolation.

Using Social Media Consciously

During the pandemic, the creation of social connections largely takes place online. Due to the limited possibility of meeting people in real life and the increased time spent on electronic devices as a result of the pandemic, our participants all report an increase in time spent on social media, as previous literature suggested would occur (Orben et al. 2020, 637). Remarkably, the negative consequences that previous studies predict contradict the results of the interviews. To explain this observation, we noticed that the way the students interact with social media platforms has changed dramatically since the start of the pandemic, arguably for the better.

Firstly, instead of passively consuming the content presented to them, our interviewees explain that they are more actively using social media in beneficial ways, while simultaneously being mindful about the dangers of too much use. As an example, the majority of our participants agree that the content they see and post themselves consists of less personal pictures and "random" content and has become more "serious" and "important" with posts concerning news or politics. Marie explains this as follows: "You know, there are a lot of things happening in the world. So just to raise awareness and feel a little bit more active you use social media, and also kind of to see things going on in people's lives." The last sentence of this quote portrays how the students interact with social media more consciously instead of passively using the platforms to pass time, as they reported doing before the pandemic. Our interviewees are now very clear about the purpose of their time spent on social media. It is used as a tool for actively staying in contact with friends, sharing ideas and for more meaningful self-expression. Elizabeth provides a very clear example of this:

Social media became kind of like a creative outlet because I would post on there a lot - the pictures that I took or the things that I was seeing or feeling. It was actually... I feel like social media can usually be pretty detrimental to my mental health, but it was really nice to have it around that time [during the lockdown].

Although she still recognizes the negative effects social media can have, Elizabeth describes using these platforms in a way that actually benefits her greatly. This contrasts the way she approached social media before the pandemic, namely more as a distraction. Both the realization of the influences and the different positive uses of social media indicate that Elizabeth, just like most other interviewees, no longer uses social media to meaninglessly scroll through her feed. Instead the students have adopted a more conscious interaction with these platforms, using them for their benefit, like enabling the user to stay connected and express themselves, while simultaneously being mindful of the possible negative effects.

The second discovery revolves around our participants' differing reactions to the content that they encounter on social media, mostly in regard to the previously mentioned Fear of Missing Out (FoMo) as presented by Throuvala et. al (2018, 168). When seeing social media content depicting groups meeting up or having parties, our participants do not report feeling bad or jealous about being left out, but rather criticize the people that are posting about these meet-ups. Additionally, most of our interviewees mention that seeing these posts made them feel better about themselves for adhering to the government restrictions. As Nicole stated:

I would say personally, I think that people are posting less about that [hanging out in groups]. Because I think it also kind of plays into that, like people almost criticizing them then when they see 'Oh, these people are hanging out, they're not supposed to be hanging out'. It's not so much that 'oh, I wasn't invited', because then they'll play the card of 'Oh, but they're not allowed to be hanging out. So good on me for being the one who's following the rules.

The FoMo seems to have transformed into a type of social condemnation, generally causing a feeling of superiority rather than a feeling of exclusion. Our participants also agree that they and their peers are vocal about this, calling each other out for breaking the rules, as Eric describes: "[Y]ou probably do get like criticism, and there are people even within your friend group that like, rightfully so, are like, 'Okay, what are you doing? We're trying to socially distance, we're trying to get the numbers down, right?'" Mentioning the disobedience of others while stressing self-adherence to rules is something that Williams et al. (2020, 5) already discovered. However, the decrease in FoMo contradicts the research by Throuvala et al. (2018, 168), which identifies this as a prevalent issue in social media. Despite the increase in social media use, our findings suggest that FoMo has actually decreased as a result of the pandemic. This decrease in FoMo can be explained by our participants' more conscious interaction with social media, using it as a beneficial tool to check in with friends and

share important news. This conscious use of online platforms seems to be a novel finding that some scholars, such as Davis (2013) and Mazzoni and Iannone (2014), do not address.

The social condemnation of peers for their actions shared on social media does however bring forth another issue regarding surveillance and sociotechnical systems, famously discussed in Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Scholars generally view modern social media platforms as an inverted panopticon, one where the individual is constantly watched by an unknown number of peers who act as controlling guards. Due to the social expectations set by their peers, social media users adjust their behavior accordingly in order to appeal to the norms and values of those around them. At some point, these norms become so embodied by the individual that they no longer need any social forces to control their behavior. This could explain why many of our interviewees described using social media less to showcase their daily activities as they adapted to the social expectations that meeting up with others and sharing this online was no longer seen as desirable. Although social media is commonly understood to be 'panoptic' and thus a highly surveilled space, many users have not been found to adapt their behavior to these supposedly controlling forces (Romele et al. 2017, 205). When taking into consideration the examples mentioned by our interviewees, it seems as though there do exist certain individuals who are not bothered by the fact that everybody can see the illegal behavior they showcase online. However, as most of our interviewees mentioned, meeting in larger groups and thus violating government-imposed rules is indeed frowned upon by peers, not only indirectly. This criticism arguably discourages the illegal behavior or at least the act of sharing it online, making social media platforms a force that discourages young people to violate the COVID-19 regulations and influencing them to become those who in turn discipline others.

Countering Loneliness and Gaining Confidence from Aloneness

These online interactions also led our participants to realize the negative aspects of

social media. This resulted in the conscious choice to lessen their time on social media by putting away their phones and spending time on their own. This is the third and final theme we explore. In general, spending time alone is something that our interviewees report doing a lot more since the start of the pandemic. However, rather than reporting feelings of loneliness and isolation as predicted by Hämmig (2019, 14), Pietrabissa and Simpson (2020, 13-14), and Raza et. al (2021, 114-116), students report that this time alone allows them to rediscover their old hobbies and make time for new ones, which they state would not have occurred had it not been for the pandemic. Nicole, for instance, suggests that:

I think coming out of it, so being in a lockdown, I realized that I actually appreciated the time to myself and to just kind of calm down, like, focusing on things that I hadn't had time for, like just things like playing the piano or going for walks and taking pictures or... painting or something like that. Just activities that I never really had time for before? ... So I think that I actually learned that yeah, I just need more time for myself.

Not only does Nicole appreciate the time she now has to herself, the pandemic also allowed her to *learn* that she *needs* more time for herself. The consequences of social isolation enable her to spend more time by herself, something that daily life in pre-COVID times did not allow. Thus, the pandemic taught her something she did not even know she needed.

Rather than focusing on feelings of loneliness due to social isolation, our participants speak of their increased alone time as an opportunity for positive self-discovery. Thus, they introduced us to a novel concept we had not taken into account coming into the study—the art of spending time alone in a positive and meaningful way. As defined by Danneel et al. (2018, 149), “aloneness is the objective state of being without company [...] and must, therefore, be distinguished from the subjective feeling of loneliness.” Therefore, we found that aloneness as described by our participants is drastically different from the loneliness the literature suggested our participants would report.

This aloneness also taught our participants more about themselves which led to the development of a more positive self-perception among the majority of our interviewees. Amanda, for instance, stated that, “...I also feel like I've just liked hanging out with myself a lot more than I did before the pandemic... Yeah, that's one of the things, yeah, being more like confident on my own, I guess.” Amanda, like Nicole, also views the increased alone time during the pandemic as something positive, and she goes as far as to say that she actually has become more confident on her own and enjoys “hanging out with” herself. Interestingly, none of our participants counter this development. Rather, many agree that they have more positive feelings towards themselves and do not feel the need to see others. John even states the following:

The most positive impact it [the pandemic] had was just like being able to be by yourself and learning how to, like, deal with that and not always having to be outside and being social, but learning that you can also be by yourself and stay sane, I guess...

For John, the most valuable lesson he learned during the pandemic is exactly what our participants bring up many times—learning to be with yourself and not having a constant need to socialize with other people. By saying this, John also draws on the idea that prior to the pandemic, he experienced a need to see others, thus avoiding spending time alone. Now that he has spent so much time on his own, he realizes that it is not necessary to have an overly busy social life.

Overall, when reflecting on the time spent alone, our participants seem to recall a positive time of self-reflection, discovery, and even a growth in confidence. These findings counter studies such as Hämmig's (2019, 14) which predicted higher risks of mental and physical health problems in times of social isolation and Loades et al.'s (2020, 1218) who identified adolescents as the group most at risk for these problems. This positive alone time did not resemble feelings of loneliness and thus presents a novel finding—that these adolescents found more positive experiences in

this new social situation than they did negative ones.

Embracing Social Change in Times of COVID-19

Throughout our interviews the majority of our participants describe that their social life has changed significantly. Each interviewee reported immense downscaling of their social circles, emphasizing that social life during the pandemic is distinctly different to their life prior to COVID-19. Interestingly, the actual experience of these social changes is overwhelmingly positive. Our analysis showed that not only did our participants report higher quality friendships, they also seem to have found ways to forge meaningful connections with their friends online, using social media more consciously than before. Additionally, the pursuit of both forgotten and novel hobbies and the positive self-perception gained from this time spent alone reveals that rather than feeling lonely due to a lack of socializing with others, they have gained a newfound appreciation for time spent alone with themselves. These findings seem to contrast many previous studies, such as Klinenberg (2001, 514) who warned of the grave consequences of social isolation in the face of natural disasters. However, whilst Klinenberg focused on senior citizens, our interviewees are all young adults whose overall health risks differ from those of older populations. Also, a heat wave does not allow for people to leave the house due to the dangerous conditions, whilst many of our participants reported more time spent outdoors with an increased appreciation for nature. It is also important to note that technology has evolved immensely since 1995, and thus our participants have a means of social contact that Klinenberg's population did not—social media. All of these factors could explain why our study found such contrasting results.

These overwhelmingly positive experiences and perceptions of aloneness could be explained by the high-quality friendships our participants reported creating due to the pandemic. This falls in line with Banerjee and Rai (2020, 525-526) who found that feelings of loneliness can be countered if one has strong

social connections. Raza et. al (2021, 123-124) also found that whilst loneliness and a feeling of being trapped inside was a common theme, many students also found solace and hope in nature, in their religion, and in their newly acquired free time. Some students reported that they were able to pass the time in creative and positive ways as the pandemic allowed them to have more time to themselves than before. Our interviewees were able to do so too by appreciating the time spent alone and using it to rediscover meaningful hobbies.

However, these findings do not directly explain why our participants found such comfort in spending time by themselves. Perhaps aloneness as an objective state of being alone does not suffice as a definition of what our participants experienced. Rather, as stated by Banerjee and Rai (2020, 526), "loneliness, which on the one hand is an emotion filled with terror and desolation, solitude, its cousin is full of peace and tranquility." According to this study, the true way to counter feelings of loneliness is being able to find peace in solitude (Banerjee & Rai 2020, 526-527). We as a society, however, have unlearned the ability to spend time with ourselves due to the rapid pace of our societies (Banerjee & Rai 2020, 526). As technology advances and both communication and travel have become faster and more accessible, these instantaneous distractions cause people to avoid spending time with themselves. Astonishingly, many of our participants actually displayed an ability to find comfort in spending time alone. Their aloneness is thus akin to solitude and an ability to find peace in spending time with themselves. Banerjee and Rai (2020, 526) emphasize that the pandemic is a perfect time to rediscover old hobbies, things that require time we previously did not have in a fast-paced world. Our participants display such positive attitudes towards the pandemic because they are able to discover new things, gain confidence in themselves, and create stronger bonds with their friends and loved ones. However, even more profoundly, they have experienced this social change positively because they are able to embrace their time spent alone in ways that our society often does not allow us to do.

Implications for Further Research: Aloneness as a Universal Lesson

Since our participants are a very specific sample of senior year students from the John F. Kennedy School in Berlin, we acknowledge that our findings are confined to them. As mentioned earlier, students attending the JFKS typically come from middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds which could explain why our interviewees were able to report certain positive experiences and may not have been affected by certain struggles, as identified by previous literature, that other students currently face who do not have close-knit social circles and access to technology. Interviewing students from different socio-economic backgrounds, schools, social circles, and even countries could lead to different results. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the majority of our interviewees identify as female, and thus gender could be an important factor affecting the results of our research. We as researchers also have certain biases that may influence how we interpret the interviews, adding to the limitations of our results. For instance, many of the themes discussed during the interviews resonated with us as individuals since the pandemic has also greatly affected our lives. On the other hand, the relatively small age gap between the interviewees and us researchers made for very easy communication, also aided by the fact that one of us attended the JFKS as well. Therefore, as there is a limited amount of research available on the recent pandemic, it is important that similar studies are conducted in different contexts to gather more insights on social changes in adolescent lives during the pandemic. Next to that, it would be interesting to conduct follow-up interviews with our participants to assess whether these significant changes such as the appreciation for time spent alone are short-or long-term changes. If life returns to the pre-pandemic norm, will our participants fall back into their old habits or are these realizations a permanent change in how they view their social lives? Lastly, although our findings are not generalizable to a larger population due to their qualitative nature and specific sample, we do believe that the

implications of this study place it in a broader and more global context. As many of us are experiencing similar times of isolation, these lessons transcend beyond our participants' experiences. Perhaps we can learn from these young people and break away from our unlearned ability to be alone in our modern, 'always-on' society.

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