COUNTRY REPORT:

Türkiye

What Does Social Connection Mean for Türkiye?

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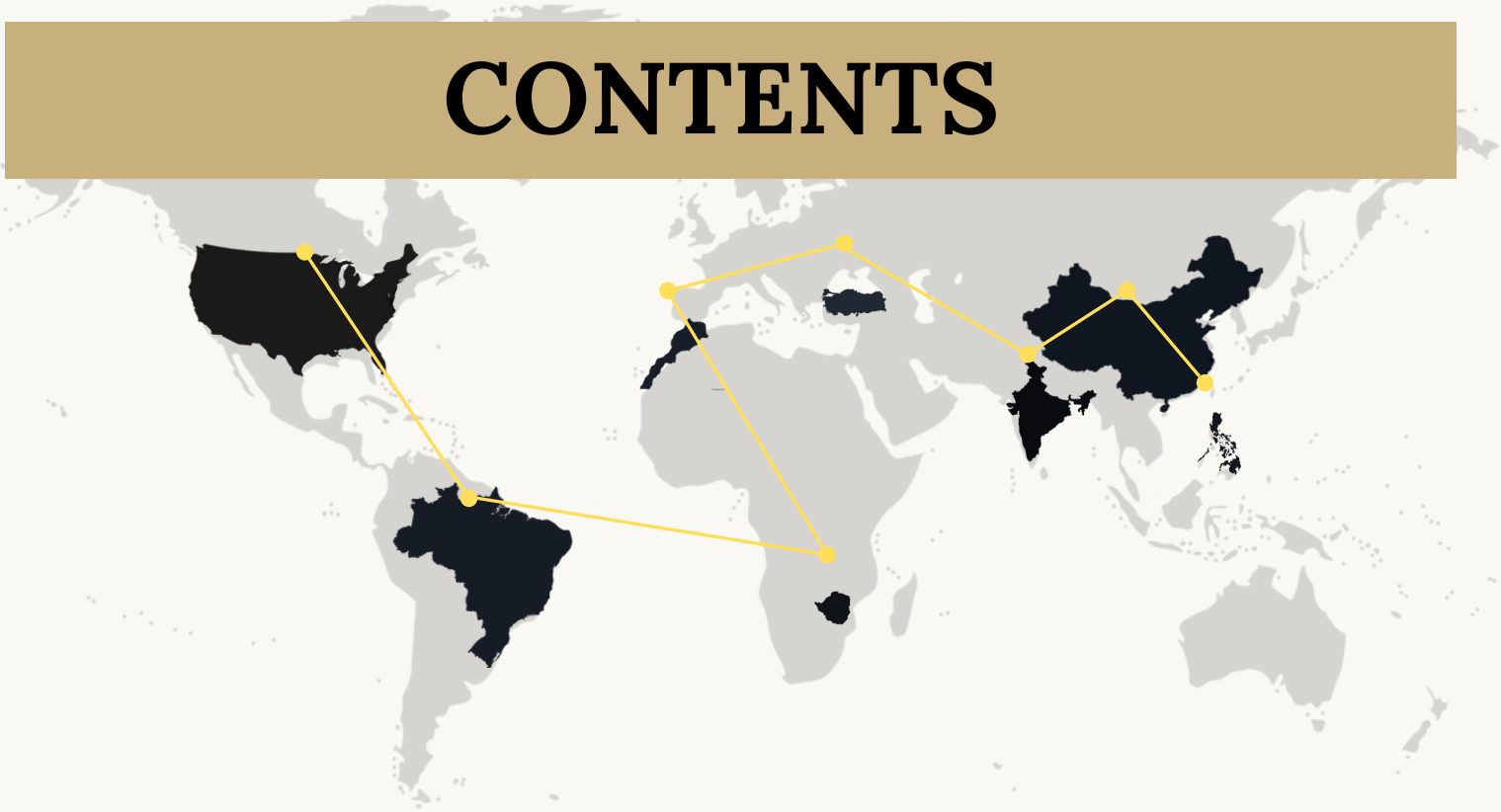

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A Multi-Country Investigation into the Conceptualization and Experience of Social Connection, Social Isolation, and Loneliness

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1. Summary Report

"It is a beautiful feeling that allows you to discover new things, but it also makes you feel very unhappy and lonely."

- participant from Türkiye

Introduction

This report presents findings from a multi-country qualitative study examining how people across diverse cultural settings conceptualize and experience social connection, belonging, disconnection, and loneliness. The project engages with eight countries: Brazil, China, India, Morocco, the Philippines, Türkiye, the United States, and Zimbabwe.

The goal is to provide actionable insights for monitoring and intervention for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers by highlighting both universal and culture-specific dimensions of social connection, disconnection and loneliness.

In Türkiye, hospitality and neighborliness are central cultural values, shaping how people understand connection and belonging.

Methodology

The study employed a stratified sampling design and recruited 354 participants aged 18 and older across eight countries. Stratification included age, gender, income, partnership status, loneliness severity, urban/rural residence, and region. Recruitment followed a drift sampling strategy, combining targeted outreach with participant referrals.

Semi-structured interviews (2–3 hours each) explored the individual's social map, functions of their social connections, definition and experiences of social connection, belonging, disconnection, and loneliness. The interview included a meta-cognitive portion where individuals reflected on how and why they have provided the answers that they have given. Data were then transcribed, translated into English, and de-identified. Country teams conducted inductive coding before iteratively synthesizing results into a shared framework. Thematic coding was supported by qualitative analysis tools (Quirkos, NVivo, Google Sheets).

Analytic Approach

For each interview the whole transcript was first mapped to an analysis summary sheet which summarizes all sections of the interview. Information from these summary sheets were then aggregated together to form the evidence table. Concurrently, each transcript was subjected to a selective line-by-line coding focusing on how individuals experience and conceptualize social connection (including how individuals define social connection, how they characterize good and deficient social connections, and how they define belonging); as well as how they experience and conceptualize disconnection and loneliness (including how the individuals experience and define disconnection, experience and define loneliness, and whether make the a distinction between loneliness and solitude).

For the line-by-line coding, country leads initially inductively coded manuscripts independently of the rest of the team. The codes that were developed then reflected culturally applicable elements. Codes from across all countries were then collated and synthesized, and overlapping or similar codes were integrated.

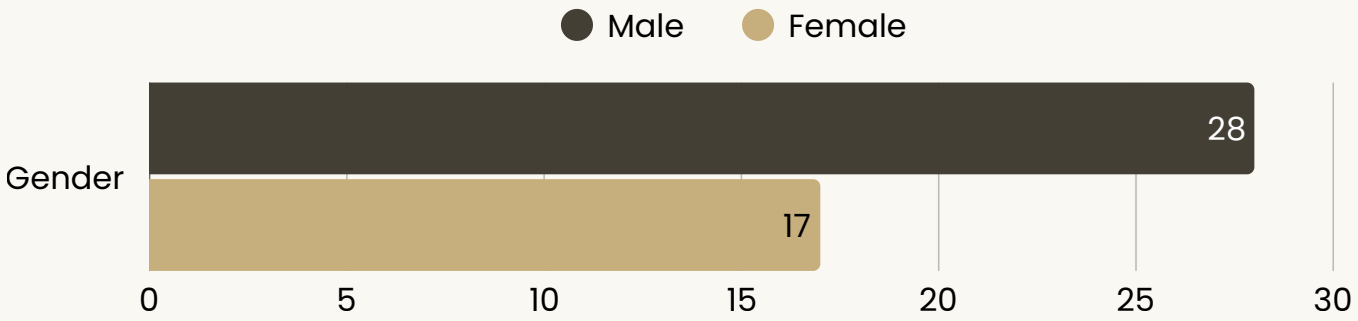
This synthesis provided the coding framework, which the research team then applied to the full set of transcripts.

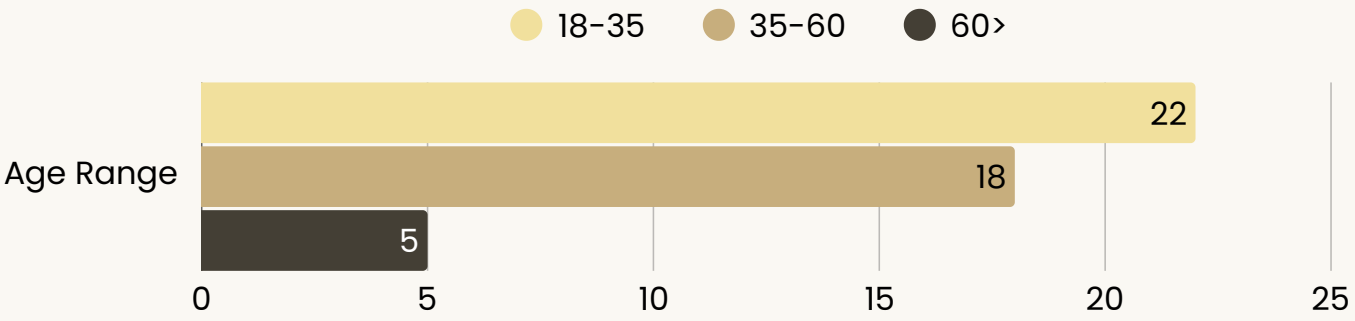
For example, the code [Emotional depth / superficiality] were used for responses that indicate the depth or superficiality of the emotional connection such as when one participant mentioned "People could be extroverted but still lonely if they don't really connect on a deeper level." Codes are not mutually exclusive, and transcript portions can be coded with multiple applicable codes

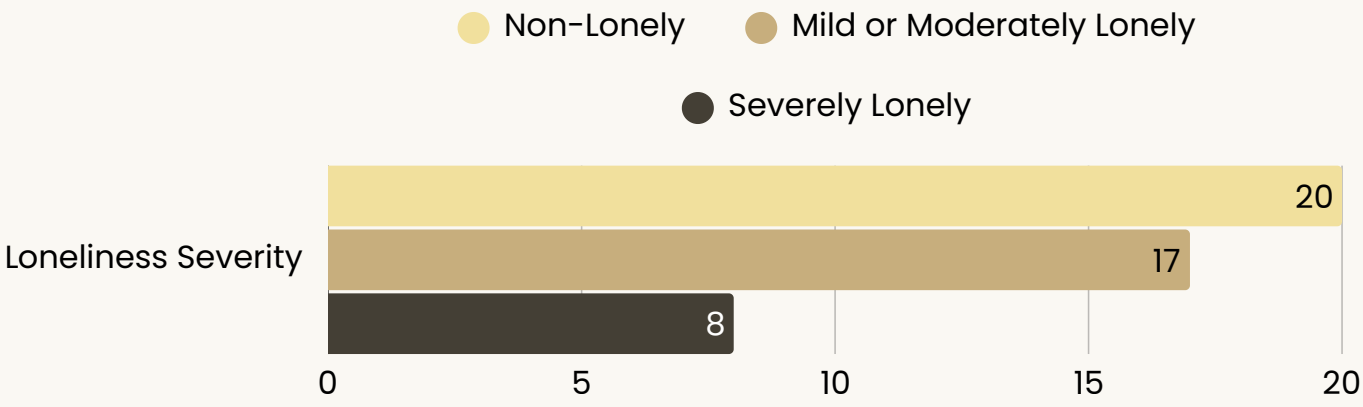
Codes were clustered as to whether they referred to the characterization of the relationship (e.g., "closeness/depth", "duration"), the interaction (e.g., "frequency of interaction", "reciprocity of interaction"), the function of the interaction (e.g., "instrumental support", "emotional support"), the perceived characteristics of the other (e.g., "availability", "trustworthiness"), or one's self state (e.g., "satisfaction", "obligation") . The full list of codes can be found in the project OSF. The team met weekly to refine the codes, clarifying provisional definitions and applicability of the codes to instances in the data.

Sample Demographics Overview

Participant Profile Summary
👤 Total Sample: 45







*Loneliness severity was determined during sampling using a single item from the Centre for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D): *"During the past week, have you felt lonely?"* Responses were categorized as: Non-lonely: ≤1 day, Mild/Moderate: 1–4 days, Severe: 5–7 days.

Summary of Select Findings

Key Social Categories

In Türkiye, connection is rooted in family, friendships, and community life, but extends far beyond people. Participants described profound ties to nature, animals, and meaningful places, which often provide emotional grounding equal to or greater than human relationships. Pets, in particular, were seen as trusted companions, while cafes, neighborhoods, and workplaces also shaped everyday belonging.

Challenges and Quality of Connection

While relationships are highly valued, they are often fragile under the weight of unmet expectations, misunderstandings, and life transitions. Divorce, relocation, and caregiving responsibilities frequently disrupt ties. Participants also described withdrawing from others when overwhelmed, highlighting that disconnection can be both imposed and chosen.

Definitions of Connection and Belonging

Belonging is expressed not only through family and friends but also through sensory and aesthetic experiences—sounds, light, weather, and nature. Emotional closeness is central, yet belonging can also mean connection to a place, an animal, or a spiritual practice. For many, it is less about permanence and more about resonance and meaning in daily life.

Cultural Specificity

Turkish participants described a broad spectrum of referents of connection—nature, pets, places, and even objects—showing how belonging reaches beyond interpersonal ties. At the same time, societal expectations around marriage, caregiving, and emotional restraint shape how connection is expressed.
Disconnection is sometimes reframed positively, as a choice for self-reflection or protection, underscoring the layered meaning of ties in Turkish culture.

Disconnection and Loneliness

Loneliness in Türkiye is described as sadness, heaviness, and a sense of being unsupported, but also as an opportunity for growth. Participants reported withdrawal, isolation, and feeling misunderstood, especially after losses or major transitions. Yet many also framed loneliness as a chosen solitude that allows

Summary of Select Findings

space for self-understanding, showing that loneliness is not universally negative.

Implications

Measurement in Türkiye might benefit from capturing both traditional and non-human dimensions of connection—from pets and places to aesthetic experiences—that are often overlooked in global tools. It should also reflect how disconnection is not always harmful but can serve protective or reflective functions. Policy and practice should address the pressures of caregiving, gendered expectations, and life transitions, while recognizing the cultural value of solitude and personal renewal.

Summary of Research Questions

This study was guided by a shared analytic framework and research questions* across eight participating countries:

SOCIAL MAPPING

- What are common social categories among the target population?
- What are common challenges/burdens of social connection among the target population?

SOCIAL CONNECTION

- Definition of social connection: how does the target population define social connection?
- Characteristics of a good (and deficient) social connection: what makes for a good social connection for the target population?
- Definition of belonging: what is belonging for the target population?
- What are culture specific aspects of social connection among the target population?
- What else does the target population feel connected to?

DISCONNECTION AND LONELINESS

- Experiences of disconnection: What are the experiences of disconnection among the target population?
- Definition of disconnection: How do the target population define disconnection?
- Experiences of loneliness: What are the experiences of loneliness among the target population?
- What is the physiology of loneliness among the target population?
- What are the effects of loneliness among the target population?
- How does the target population cope with loneliness?
- What factors affects loneliness for the target population?
- Definition of loneliness: How do the target population define and explain loneliness?
- Definition of loneliness: What/do the target population make a difference between loneliness and solitude?
- How are lonely individuals perceived among the target population?
- Why is loneliness difficult to be spoken about among the target population?
- What are culture specific aspects of loneliness among the target population?

META-COGNITION

- What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering their last instance of loneliness
- What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what loneliness is for them
- What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what makes for a good social connection for them
- What are the response processes leading to the participant answering the scale item of “I feel lonely” from 0-100

Summary of Project Resources

Project OSF

This project's materials are openly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at https://osf.io/p3msu, to ensure transparency, and accessibility.

- **Interview Guide:** A copy of the interview guide containing the questions asked across 8 countries
- **Deidentified Transcripts:** Interview transcripts (anonymized) from all participating countries
- **Ethics:** Documentation of institutional ethics approvals, consent processes, and ethical safeguards
- **Evidence Tables:** Verbatim transcript portions and summarized information per participant across different research questions
- **Codebook:** The codebook contains the codes, provisional code definitions and transcript portion examples across different research questions
- **Country Reports:** Country reports from the analysis of within-country data in Brazil, China, India, Morocco, the Philippines, Türkiye, the United States, and Zimbabwe.
- **Main Publication:** Pre-print of the publication that features the cross-country comparisons across the global project.

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2. Analysis Report

"Even though it's a huge campus... there was no one."

- participant from Türkiye

Common social categories

A great majority of participants (80%) listed family as a key social relationship group, often as their primary (63%) or secondary group (17%), making it the most frequently mentioned social group. Additionally, extended family, such as cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, grandchildren, and other relatives, was frequently mentioned by participants (40%). Friends were mentioned as often as family, although they were generally secondary, following family for most participants. A considerable number of participants listed friends (24%) or colleagues (5.6%) as their primary relationship group, particularly among the 18-35 age group, especially those who are single. However, for more than 40% of participants, friends were the secondary relationship group, usually coming after family. Thus, friends are the second most important source of relationships, with 70% of participants listing them as either a primary or secondary relationship group.

Another relationship group mentioned by participants is neighbors. About 30% of participants, half of whom were partnered adults over 35, mentioned neighbors as a group with which they are socially connected. Additionally, one participant mentioned shopkeepers (P33), another mentioned a volunteer from an association (P17), and another mentioned people on the shuttle. The high frequency of neighbors and other community members, such as shopkeepers, volunteers, and other micro-encounters, highlights the importance of community for fostering strong relationships in Türkiye.

Common challenges/burdens of social connection

The participants frequently reported challenges across key social categories, with family and friendships emerging as the most prominent sources of conflict. Within family relationships, issues such as communication gaps, unmet expectations, and pressure to conform (e.g., marriage or career choices) were recurring themes, particularly among younger participants who described struggles with parental pressures regarding life choices (P42, P6, P32, P23).

Older participants, particularly those over 60, expressed feelings of loneliness stemming from emotional and physical distance from their children or grandchildren (P35, P36).

Friendships were the other social category where participants reported conflicts and social burdens. These conflicts were generally characterized by miscommunication, unequal effort, and gradual distancing (P11, P5), as well as feelings of being used or manipulated (P16, P28). Long-term friendships sometimes dissolved over unresolved conflicts (P38).

Less central but noteworthy were challenges with neighbors (P25, P36) and extended family (P7, P15). These patterns highlight how social burdens manifest differently across relationship types and demographic groups.

Definition of social connection

In Türkiye, the most frequently used codes under the Definition of Social Connection are "General Connection" (n = 16), "Social Structure" (n = 10); “Emotional connection/bond” (n = 8) within the Characterization of Relationship cluster; "Interaction" (n = 9) under Characterization of Interactions, and “Socialization” (n = 8) within the Functions of Relationships.

Participants often described social connection broadly as communication or conversation (P5, P8, P23, P33, P38, P41) with others. Some described it as spending time with others (P12, P27, P35, P36, P37, P44) .

Some participants also highlighted its foundation in existing relationships, such as family, friends, relatives, and romantic partners (P4, P12, P26, P35, P1, P17, P18) . In contrast, others added coworkers(P41), acquaintances (P45, P11), or even “people next to us on public transport (P44)” to their definition. One of them even described it as “All the connections we make with other people,” suggesting that for many, social connection is not limited to deep, meaningful bonds but encompasses the entire spectrum of human interaction, from the most to the least intimate.

Nevertheless, many participants tapped into it based on a feeling of closeness. Some emphasized that a social bond is not physical but is something whose existence is strongly felt. For example, “...something invisible forms between two individuals or groups—it’s what connects them ,”(P10) and “The feeling of being connected. There... To the point where I know it's there... Like an invisible rope.” (P44)

Furthermore, interaction was a key defining element. This can be exemplified by statements like: "Social relationships are the interactions we establish within a certain communication framework in our daily lives(P10)," and “Social connection, whether at work or outside, means the activities and interactions we engage in with people around us.” (P6)

In addition, socialization was another key factor that participants described as “Spending quality time together, not exhausting each other, but rather being able to help each other, having fun together, and finding common interests (P2).” Thus, beyond mere presence or interaction, an emotional connection also appears to be crucial for Turkish participants.

In contrast, codes, such as “Equality”, “Frequency of interaction”, “Reciprocity”, “Not Feeling Left Out”, “Interest in others”, and “Religion” were not mentioned, indicating that these are not central to how social connection is initially conceptualized by most participants in Türkiye. Participants also did not explicitly state “Unfamiliarity with concept”.

Emotional and functional dimensions like “Emotional depth/superficiality (n = 3),” “Emotional support (n = 4),” “Disclosure of Emotions (n = 3),” and “Shared interests (n = 4)” were present but relatively less frequently mentioned; while, “Hierarchy,” “Instrumental support,” “Informational support,” and “Sense of belonging (to a person)” were coded only once, which indicates that although valued, these are not central to how social connection is initially conceptualized by most participants.

These results underline that connections are rooted in existing ties with family, friends, and community members. “Interaction” code signifies that the connection is a dynamic process requiring continuous communication and presence. This active involvement is further reinforced by "Socialization," where shared activities and spending time together are seen as crucial for

strengthening bonds. "Emotional Connection/Bond" indicates that Turkish participants seek a deeper emotional tie beyond superficial exchanges.

In summary, the Turkish understanding of social connection is best seen as a journey from established social roles (Social Structure, General Connection) to deep emotional bonds (Emotional Connection/Bond), through active communication and shared experiences (Interaction, Socialization) which means both our established roles and our personal efforts are highly valued when describing social connection.

Characteristics of good (and deficient) social connection

In Türkiye, a good social connection is typically characterized by the codes under "Trust" (n=13), “Satisfaction/Positive Affect” (n=8), “Understanding” (n=8), "Effort/Willingness" (n=6) "Emotional support" (n=6) as well as “Love and affection” (n = 6)

“Trust” is by far the most prominent code, appearing frequently across multiple participants. Trust is seen as the foundation of any good social connection, encompassing reliability, sincerity, and the assurance that one will not be judged or betrayed. Participants articulated this as: "First of all, trust. In every kind of way, this is important in a family, in a friendship, in a relationship", “I call it trust and love. So, in terms of trust, I think one of the most important things in a relationship is trust.” and “Knowing that I can share without being judged gives me that trust. Whether I do something right, wrong, or even feel good or bad at the time, knowing that I can be listened to without judgment or that if they have a solution, they’ll provide it, gives me that trust.” The lack of trust ("Mistrust makes it hard to open up to people… Trust is essential in close relationships.") is also cited as a significant deficiency.

“Effort / Willingness” within the *Characterization of Actors* was also mentioned frequently. Participants recognize that good connections require conscious effort. "*Even if I don’t talk to someone for five months, I remember them and send a message. I try to keep the conversations going. I make an effort to stay connected.* (P29)” emphasizes the active contribution needed to maintain a relationship.

“Satisfaction / Positive Affect” is also frequently cited as a direct outcome and indicator of a good social connection. Participants expressed feelings of happiness and contentment, stating, "I’m very satisfied. I’m very happy with my work and friendships(P3)," and "Being in a social connection feels good. It makes you feel like you're not alone(P28)". This underscores that the positive emotional experience is a defining feature of a well-functioning connection.

The desire to be understood and have mutual understanding in a relationship is another strong theme. Participants express: “Then, I guess, understanding. Because everyone's way of dealing with things is different. That's why you need to be a little more understanding (P19)." and "I can say that I felt understood and listened to (P4)". This points to the importance of cognitive and emotional alignment for a good connection.

“Emotional Support” is another frequently mentioned code as a defining characteristic of good connections. Participants value "having someone to talk to (P6)" when feeling down during difficult times. Participants state, “I’ve struggled a lot emotionally in the past. I went through a tough emotional period, and during that time, my family’s support really helped me get through it(P3)”. This highlights the comfort and regulation provided by supportive relationships.

“Love and Affection” is also highly prevalent, highlighting that good social connections are infused with genuine feelings of love and appreciation. Participants explicitly state, *"Love. Knowing that you are loved, that you are valued*", and see "*Respect, love*" as intertwined for a relationship's foundation.

In contrast, codes “General relationship ease”, “Relationship as a burden”, “Virtual connection”, “Being present”, “Liking”, “Not related to instrumentality / benefits”, “Moral duty/obligation”, “Accepted”, “Self-reflection”, and “Not heard / ignored” were not used.

In summary, for people in Türkiye, a good social connection is an emotional relationship that requires active effort. Most importantly, it is built on a strong foundation of trust. This type of connection doesn't just happen on its own; it needs conscious work and is defined by real love and affection. The purpose of this bond is to offer crucial emotional support and mutual understanding. Ultimately, this leads to a deep feeling of personal satisfaction and happiness. It's important to note that this ideal connection is about sincere feelings and emotional depth, not about what someone feels they have to do, or what practical benefits they can get.

Definition of belonging: what is belonging for the target population?

In Türkiye, the most frequently used codes under the Definition of Belonging are "Authenticity / Acceptance of self" (n = 9), "General feelings of belonging / inclusion" (n = 8) within the Self States cluster, and “Trust” (n = 7) within the Characterization of group/relationship.

“Authenticity / Acceptance of self” is the most prominent code, with participants strongly associating belonging with the freedom to be their true selves and being accepted unconditionally. Examples include: “Not being disturbed by the time I am there, not feeling like I am too much there, and

being able to go with the flow (P2).", "It's like the feeling of 'this is my home'. No matter what happens, no matter what I do, I am accepted. With my flaws, my mistakes—I am still accepted. (P7)", and "Being understood, being part of it, existing there, being accepted as you are, with your strengths and weaknesses. That's what belonging means to me. It's being loved unconditionally (P24)". This emphasizes that for true belonging to be felt, a person must experience unconditional love and acceptance, creating a "home-like" environment where they are valued for who they are, not for who they pretend to be.

Many participants provided broad descriptions of what belonging taps into "General feelings of belonging / inclusion" code, which feels like, indicating a general sense of inclusion and comfort. Examples include: "Belonging means people who are dedicated to each other. You belong to them, and they belong to you. (P26)", "That's a very tough question. It's a very strong feeling, but I think it's also a feeling that creates a lot of attachment. I don't feel like I belong anywhere right now. (P4)" and "Yes, belonging means that when you are in an environment or a place, you feel that you belong there with all your feelings. It's not necessarily going to be nice all the time. Sometimes you may want to be in bad environments. To gain new experiences. Something like that (P40)."

Trust is also a cornerstone of belonging. Participants articulated: "Belonging, for me, is an interaction based on trust in long-term relationships (P5)", "I don't know if this is because of my love and trust in my spouse, but right now, I feel like I belong here (P3)", and "At least I feel safe. Maybe that's what I would call belonging (P33)". This shows trust as a prerequisite for feeling truly secure and rooted.

In contrast, codes “Missed”, “Frequency of interaction”, “Not outsider / not excluded”, “Other-in-the-self”, “Alignnment of goals”, “Disclosure / Sharing of positive and negative emotions”, and “Pets” were not used.

“Comfort” (*n* = 5), “Identification with the group” (*n* = 5), “Emotional connection / bond” (*n* = 4), “Purpose/ Part of something bigger” (*n* = 4), “Duration of belonging” (*n* = 3), “Valued/appreciated” (*n* = 3), which indicates that although not central to how belonging is initially conceptualized these are also valued by most participants.

In summary, for Turkish participants, the concept of belonging for the target population is deeply rooted in emotional safety, authenticity, and a sense of stable, enduring connection with people and groups. It is characterized by feelings of being accepted, understood, and valued for who one truly is, often within long-term relationships and familiar environments.

What are culture-specific aspects of social connection?

Participants highlighted several unique aspects of social connections in Türkiye, emphasizing the role of familial bonds, communal traditions, and cultural expectations. The most prominent themes mentioned by almost all participants were the strength of familial and communal ties, where family gatherings, shared meals, weddings, religious holidays, and national celebrations serve as key moments for reinforcing social bonds. Türkiye’s collectivist social structure was another recurring theme, facilitating the formation of social bonds through communal activities like gün yapma (traditional women’s gatherings) and casual interactions such as drinking tea together (P5, P14). These practices reinforce solidarity, though some participants critiqued these bonds as performative, hypocritical, or lacking boundaries, noting gossip and hierarchical pressure (P 1, P43, P32, P41).

Participants also frequently emphasized the communal and personal warmth and friendliness unique to Turkish people. Many described Turkish people as outgoing, friendly, and quick to engage in deep personal conversations—traits considered culturally distinctive (P 29, P11, P2, P8, P6, P4, P33, P40; P29, P8) . Neighborliness and community support were frequently highlighted as traditional strengths; however, some participants noted that urbanization and modernization have led to a decline in trust among Turkish people and a shift toward individualism (P14, P8, P40, P23), with some expressing fear of strangers and reluctance to form new social bonds (P39).

What else does the target population feel connected to?

Participants described a rich variety of non-human referents to which they felt emotionally or symbolically connected. The most frequently reported theme across responses was a strong attachment to nature (n = 15). Participants described feeling a sense of peace, renewal, and belonging through elements such as trees, the sea, forests, and natural sounds. This was especially common among female participants across both age groups, for example, one participant (P30) mentioned feeling deeply connected to the sound of wind and leaves, as well as watching the sea. Similarly, another (P9) emphasized the emotional effect of the seaside, forests, and sunny weather.

Closely related to this theme was the recurring mention of animals (n = 13), particularly cats (n = 12) and dogs (n = 2). Many participants described their pets as significant emotional anchors or even as members of their inner world. In several cases, the bond with animals surpassed that with some people. For instance, one participant (P22) stated that dogs understand him better than most people, while another (P11) emphasized the depth of her bond with her cat, noting that she would be devastated if she lost it.

Street animals were also a notable referent, symbolizing shared vulnerability and coexistence (P25).

In addition to nature and animals, several participants (n = 13) referred to places as meaningful referents. These included childhood hometowns, cities they had lived in for long periods, or specific locations such as cafes or coastal areas. The emotional bond with place often carried elements of nostalgia or security. For example, one participant [P8] emphasized the emotional impact of natural settings, stating "Going to the seaside makes me very happy, the sea. Definitely. The weather has to be sunny." Another participant (P34) highlighted the importance of both professional engagement and familiar places, stating, "I love my job. Being involved in my job. Apart from that, I have certain cafes. I like going there. Because I feel more comfortable there." Another participant (P9) described her continued attachment to a city where she spent seven formative years, while another (P4) discussed her connection to both her current place of residence and her birthplace.

Material objects also emerged as important sources of attachment, often carrying symbolic or emotional value. Some participants (*n* = 6) mentioned plush toys, electronics, or old belongings that serve as sources of comfort or continuity. Notably, one participant (P12) reported a particular emotional bond with dinosaur plushies, while another (P28) described his enduring connection to his first car as a symbol of personal achievement.

Religion and spirituality were also identified as referents of connection (*n* = 3), although less frequently than nature or animals. Where mentioned, religious connection often went beyond belief to include daily practices and values. One participant (P15) underlined that her connection was not only to religion but to fulfilling its requirements, reflecting a deeper, action-oriented engagement.

Finally, a smaller number of participants (n = 3) described aesthetic and sensory referents—such as music, lights, or weather patterns—as meaningful. These responses often reflected a more abstract or reflective engagement with the world. For example, one participant (P6) listed sounds, artworks, and places of worship as part of his affective environment, suggesting a multifaceted sensory and symbolic connection, saying: "It could be anything—flowers, the weather, sounds, lights, everything." These findings highlight the breadth of connection beyond interpersonal relationships and suggest that participants derive meaning and emotional stability from a wide range of non-human sources in their environments.

Experiences of disconnection

Participants' experiences of disconnection within the Turkish sample reflected a complex interplay between internal emotional states, interpersonal dynamics, and contextual life events. The most frequently used codes were clustered under Self States, particularly "Withdrawal" (n = 11), "Isolation" (n = 6), and "Mis/non-understanding" (n = 3). These experiences were often described as cyclical and cumulative, with many participants recalling moments when they deliberately pulled away from others due to emotional overwhelm or relational strain. For example, one participant noted, "I consciously try to put a stop to my connections. I shut everything down" (P1), while another described withdrawing completely after divorce and turning inward with symptoms of fatigue and detachment (P18).

Isolation emerged as a related but distinct theme, often positioned as a state rather than an act. Participants shared experiences of being physically and socially cut off from others, sometimes due to caregiving responsibilities

(P8) or marital transitions (P9). One participant stated, “After I got married, I slowly felt disconnected from my social environment. No one was with me” (P38). In contrast, Withdrawal was more intentional and often linked to protective strategies during emotionally charged periods, as in the case of a participant who stopped responding to friends after failing an exam (P5).

Another prominent experience was feeling misunderstood, particularly during times of grief, stress, or misalignment in values. One participant described how the loss of her father left her feeling invisible to others: “When I was grieving… I felt like no one understands, so I chose to keep it to myself” (P11). Similarly, relational misunderstandings—especially with romantic partners—were cited as direct causes of emotional distance (P7).

The Characterization of Relationship cluster was also salient (n = 6), with several participants describing relationships that became emotionally distant or ended altogether. One participant stated, “We were no longer on the same wavelength” (P17), while another described a decisive break with a close friend due to a violation of moral values within the group (P24). These ruptures were often framed not only in terms of hurt but also as moments of clarity and realignment.

Life transitions such as marriage, geographic relocation, and loss frequently triggered disconnection (n = 8). Participants described feeling alienated after moving to new cities or countries, often accompanied by a sense of regret and nostalgia (P10; P4). Similarly, physical distance from loved ones was cited as a major reason for disconnection (P27). These moments of transition often overlapped with feelings of disappointment and lack of support, as when participants expected care during illness or emotional difficulty but were left unsupported (P42; P37).

Several participants (n = 5) also described sources of disconnection that were tied to physiological states, physical environments, or subjective embodied experiences. For instance, some participants described the impact of hormonal changes on their sense of disconnection, especially during PMS (P3; P43). Others referred to somatic symptoms (e.g., difficulty breathing, headaches) as physical manifestations of their emotional disconnection (P 29), or even dissociative experiences where they felt as if they were not fully present in their environments (P25). In some cases, certain places were reported to trigger disconnection, such as airports or specific family homes (P36).

Importantly, disconnection was not uniformly framed as negative. A number of participants (n = 3) described intentional disconnection from individuals or groups with whom they no longer identified. For example, one participant stated, “I can more easily forget the ties with people I no longer resonate with” (P35). Another (P33) described disconnection as a personal choice that provided space for introspection and growth: “I'm trying to calm my own water… it feels good.”

Overall, the Turkish data illustrate that experiences of disconnection are shaped by both internal vulnerabilities and external constraints. The interplay between psychological states (e.g., withdrawal, misunderstanding), social ruptures (e.g., termination, emotional distance), and contextual changes (e.g., geographic relocation, hormonal shifts) provides a layered understanding of how connection is sustained or lost.

Participants also frequently emphasized the communal and personal warmth and friendliness unique to Turkish people. Many described Turkish people as outgoing, friendly, and quick to engage in deep personal conversations—traits considered culturally distinctive (P29, P30, P31, P32, P33, P34, P35).

Neighborliness and community support were frequently highlighted as traditional strengths; however, some participants noted that urbanization and modernization have led to a decline in trust among Turkish people and a shift toward individualism (P36, P37, P38, P39), with some expressing fear of strangers and reluctance to form new social bonds (P40).

Experiences of loneliness

Surprisingly, "Loneliness as positive" was the most frequently used code (n=13). Many participants evaluated loneliness as a meaningful experience; an opportunity for self-reflection, personal growth, self-awareness, and emotional clarity. For instance, P1 shared: "There are times when I enjoy my loneliness. It gives me space to think and to understand myself better." Similarly, P2 described it as "A beautiful feeling that allows you to be in touch with your thoughts," while also acknowledging that "it makes you feel very unhappy and lonely."

For those that experience it negatively, the experience of loneliness among Turkish participants is predominantly characterized by internal emotional and cognitive states. Participants frequently described feelings such as sadness, withdrawal, helplessness, and a sense of being unsupported. The most commonly used codes include "Isolation / Sense of being alone, (n=10)" "Loneliness as positive, (n=13)" "Depression,(n=7)" "Disconnection from others,(n=6)" "General negative affect,(n=6)" and "Lack of support / 'no

one there' (n=6)." These highlight that loneliness is often experienced through inward emotional processes rather than overt social dynamics.

Despite these reflections, the overall tone of the responses leaned more toward the negative aspects of loneliness. "Isolation / Sense of being alone" was a frequently used code (N=10). P35 shared: "...During those times, I don't even want to live. It's like I'm disconnected from the world... I don't enjoy anything. I don't want to live. I have such days." Emotional burden, depression, and mental distress were commonly reported. P27 stated: "Loneliness brings fear. It causes unhappiness. It pulls you down, makes you feel bad. Over time, it leads to mental distress. You can't get anything productive from an unhappy person... Loneliness is awful." Several participants also described loneliness as a lack of emotional support, even in the presence of others. P4 said: "I had goals I wanted to achieve, and I achieved them, but no one was there to share it with." Similarly, P3 reflected: "Not having anyone in my life. Even though I have friends, it still feels like I'm alone."

Experiences also varied by loneliness level. Severely lonely participants' accounts often involved deep emotional suffering, including low self-worth and suicidal thoughts. For instance, P45 said: "It's such a different feeling that I can't describe it with these words. I mean, you get stressed, you get bored, you get overwhelmed, you feel tense. Maybe you get palpitations, you have panic attacks, you have anxiety. Sometimes you feel like I should just kill myself and relax. It's such a different feeling. I can't seem to describe it.'" Moderately lonely participants presented a more paradoxical view: P2 stated, "It is a beautiful feeling that allows you to discover new things, but it also makes you feel very unhappy and lonely." They recognized loneliness as an opportunity for self-reflection, while also acknowledging its emotional weight. Non-lonely participants tended to see loneliness as a potentially enriching experience. P14 said: "I don't think loneliness is necessarily a bad

experience. I believe it depends on how you perceive it. It can also be an opportunity for self-reflection or making new decisions."

Some participants linked loneliness to personal attributes. P43 attributed it to his appearance: "You're lonely because you're bald. You're lonely because you have a hairy belly. You're lonely because you have a belly." P5 reflected on personality traits: "It also makes me question myself—like, am I difficult to get along with?" P44 connected it to self-esteem: "I usually feel lonely when my self-confidence is very low. I feel like no one wants to interact with me."

Finally, a distinction emerged between loneliness and disconnection based on participants' own definitions. Loneliness was often described as an internal emotional state, even in social settings. P7 explained: "There's this thing called feeling lonely in a crowd. That happens to me." In contrast, disconnection referred more to the absence of meaningful engagement, emotional distance, a break in communication, or an inability to connect with others. For example, P11 defined it as "a feeling that carries fear and anxiety," while P3 called it "the complete end of bonds," and P5 said: "Even though it's a huge campus, there was no one," pointing to a context where others are physically present but emotionally or socially unavailable."

The physiology of loneliness

Severely lonely individuals reported deep and persistent suffering, both emotionally and physically, while moderately lonely participants experienced psychosomatic distress, and non-lonely individuals tended to perceive loneliness as neutral or even enriching. The data reveal a continuum of physiological and emotional effects that vary according to loneliness level. Some non-lonely and moderately lonely participants (P4,

P6, P7, P13, P37) interpreted loneliness positively—emphasizing its potential for self-awareness, growth, and inner peace—whereas others (P3, P10, P26, P28) associated it with tension, fatigue, and self-doubt. Among the severely lonely, participants reported more intense and enduring symptoms such as significant weight loss, sleep disturbances (P15), palpitations, panic attacks, suicidal ideation (P45), and emotional numbness (P15, P16). Feelings of hopelessness, being unloved or unwanted, and worthlessness were also prevalent (P32, P34). Metaphors like "a heavy weight on your shoulders" or "being thrown aside" (P32, P34) highlighted the embodied and affective depth of their experience. Moderately lonely participants showed relatively milder somatic symptoms such as fatigue, headaches, appetite changes, and anxiety (P3, P10, P16), alongside emotional states like melancholy, internal pressure, and doubt (P2, P24, P43). Some in this group also described loneliness as an opportunity for reflection or growth (P4, P25). In contrast, non-lonely individuals reported either mild emotional responses—like sadness, stress, or crying (P28, P39)—or framed solitude as a calming or empowering experience (P6, P12, P37). Even participants who were not severely lonely (P11, P26) expressed an awareness of loneliness as a risk, capable of leading to depression or existential disconnection. These findings suggest that among Turkish participants, the experience of loneliness ranges from brief, manageable discomfort to profound emotional and physical suffering, depending on its severity and meaning for the individual.

The effects of loneliness

Loneliness frequently correlates with negative mental and behavioral outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and emotional distress. Among the participants, the most common themes were mood disturbances, declines in mental health, and disrupted daily activities, followed by changes in sleep and weight. Destructive behaviors directed at self and others were cited less frequently.

Many participants described feeling overwhelmed by sadness, self-doubt, or a sense of worthlessness (P11, P43). Some reported that loneliness exacerbated existing mental health struggles, such as eating disorders (P42) or heightened anxiety (P30).

Changes in weight were commonly linked to loneliness, often due to emotional eating or loss of appetite. Some participants reported weight gain from comfort eating (P14 P7, ,P17), while others experienced weight loss due to reduced self-care (P29, P25). Additionally, some reported experiencing both loss of appetite and emotional eating on different occasions (P3)
As for the sleep disturbances, loneliness often led to irregular sleep schedules due to difficulty falling asleep or intentional sleep avoidance (P44, P14, P7, P35), or oversleeping (P2, P6). One participant noted improved sleep during periods of loneliness (P29).

Mood disruptions were reported by nearly all participants, who described feelings of pessimism, boredom, restlessness, lethargy, or emotional numbness (P15, P45). Some mentioned a positive mood during loneliness, but again, they actually meant effects related to solitude, not loneliness (P28, P39).

Many participants reported that loneliness often reduced their motivation and productivity (P43, P1, P45 P24, P32, P35, P36, P18, P40). Some participants withdrew entirely, neglecting responsibilities and self-care (P43, P37, P35). Some reported further isolating themselves from others (P25, P44, P29), while others sought social interaction to counteract the effects (P41).

Few participants reported that they engaged in self-hurt, such as increased cigarette smoking (P25) or engaging in self-blame (P16, P11).

While less frequently mentioned, loneliness sometimes led to irritability or the harsh treatment of others (P30, P2). While few noted that their loneliness indirectly affected family members due to their withdrawn behavior (P26).

The duration of these effects varies across participants and situations. Most participants reported transient effects (lasting a couple of days or shorter), often resolving with social reconnection or self-regulation (P2, P3, P8, P45). In contrast, many reported prolonged distress, with some claiming permanent effects (P25, P35), and others noted that the duration varied by situation (P10).

Coping with loneliness

Analysis of participants' coping strategies revealed three dominant approaches. The most frequently cited was Activities (N=20), followed by Friends/Community (N=19), and then Technology (N=17). Participants often engage in different activities to cope with the feeling of loneliness and in a way, they try to relieve the intensity of this feeling with distraction. For example, P17 described his coping method as "Sometimes I clean. I vacuum while listening to music". Another method that the participants predominantly expressed is to get support from close friends and inner circle. P25 expresses this situation as follows: "I call my friends. I go to them. When I'm not alone, it passes." In today's world where technology is an important part of daily life, it is seen that the participants in Türkiye also prefer technology, especially social media, to cope with loneliness. For example P16 explains the situation as follows: "The most I would do is go on Instagram, or I'd go on Google. I might check the news. To distract myself."
In addition to these emerging strategies, it seems that close family ties (N=8), religion or spirituality (N=7) and professional help (N=6) are among the ways in which people in Türkiye have coped with loneliness. Conversely,

only a few participants stated that they used other strategies, such as focusing on work (N=2) or substances (N=2). This general trend is true both for the participants as an aggregate, and within non-lonely, moderately lonely and severely lonely participants.

Factors affecting loneliness

Participants report of several factors that would lead to loneliness. On the individual level, most participants associated loneliness with difficulties in maintaining social relationships and highlighted various factors such as being stubborn, having certain negative personal traits, negative thoughts, feeling depressed, isolation from others, breakdowns in relationships, selfishness, poor choices in social relationships, being introverted, feeling bored, lack of self-confidence, being shy, being embarrassed, being unsocial, lack of trust and communication, and having suffered pain as potentially related to loneliness (P1, P7, P13, P14, P18, P17, P25, P30, P42, P39). Some participants also noted that loneliness could have a positive side and that it may be a conscious choice made by individuals (P2, P3, P4, P1, P19, P15). For example, one participant not only described loneliness as a choice but also emphasized that being able to tolerate loneliness is an important factor:

"Some people can tolerate loneliness better, and I think that's what allows loneliness to persist. Some people truly dislike being alone, so they actively try to keep their surroundings full of people. And I assume those people don't really end up being lonely because they put in the effort—since the alternative feels more unbearable to them. For others, loneliness is more tolerable, so they experience less discomfort from it or feel it less intensely. That might be one of the triggering factors." (P2)

Additionally, the lack of awareness about one's inner world was highlighted,

and the discrepancy between individual expectations and the reality of the external world was also expressed as a significant factor on the individual level (P32, P37).

“How a person perceives their environment and themselves is very important. If there is consistency in perceiving the environment and themselves, that is, if the self-perception provides parallelism in perceiving the environment, it will affect the development of a personality that is very supportive of loneliness, that is, supportive of completely getting rid of loneliness.” (P32)

Moreover, participants emphasized factors such as not being understood, considered, loved, or valued by others; the existence of disturbing negative social ties; weak family relationships; and the inability to initiate relationships with the right people who might share common interests (P7, P1, P23, P20, P16, P15, P17, P14, P10, P11, P41).

On the social level, in addition to the individualization intensified by modernization, participants in the Turkish sample expressed that loneliness has increased among individuals due to the worsening economic conditions (P21, P24, P16, P8, P27). For instance, one participant stated:

“First of all, I think our world is a world that atomizes people a lot. I think human connection is harder than ever. I mean, working from home or disencouraging socializing at work, I mean capitalism. Well, I think capitalism is really the number one thing that causes loneliness. Okay, let me elaborate as much as I can.... The world is divided into places. Workplace, entertainment. There are certain rules expected in entertainment places. One of them is that you have to spend money. The economic situation is very bad. You know, you have to spend money to socialize, to make friends and currently the minimum wage is 22 thousand liras, rents are 25 thousand liras.

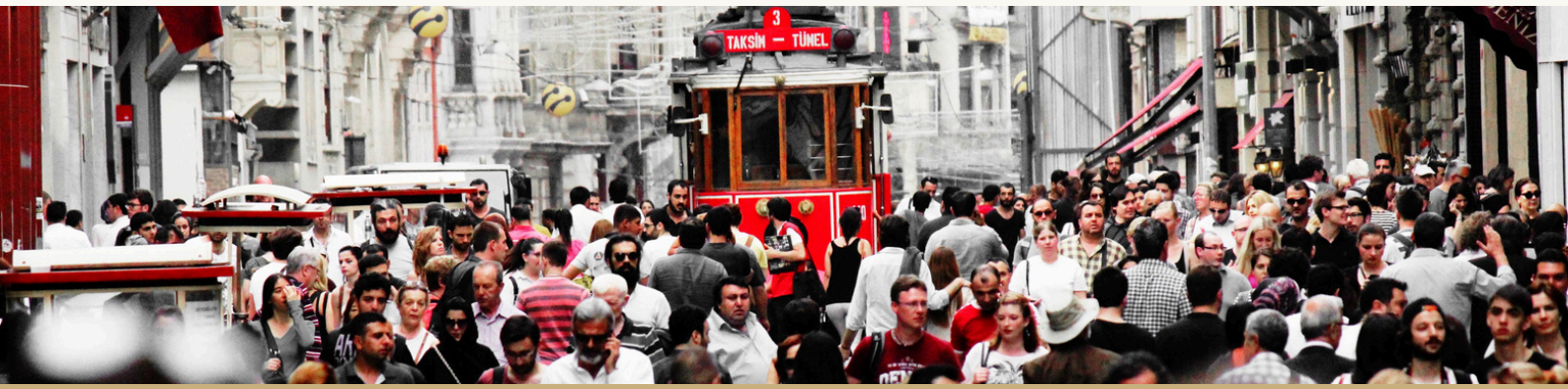
And capitalism also has a "me first" view that it integrates into people. The community has lost more importance than ever. You know, people used to do things for the community and socializing was a necessity for survival. Now everyone looks after themselves. Now everyone thinks that I don't have to do this at work, I don't have to do that, I don't owe you this, I don't owe you that, and while I think they are right up to a point, I think they are incredibly isolating themselves. Thinking that they don't owe any common decency to people And that is, at work... For example, I just said myself. I didn't say my coworkers, I said the people at my workplace. You know... I think this is a healthy perspective up to a certain point, by the way. But for someone who has no one else, it is also a perspective that can strengthen the feeling of being alone in crowds. If you don't have money, you can't make friends. If you don't have time, you can't make friends. And in this society, it is very likely that you don't have time. For example, I am currently working and preparing for an exam. Because the money I am working with right now is not enough for me. That is, I don't know, I can't explain it more." (P21)

Moreover, participants emphasized factors such as not being understood, considered, loved, or valued by others; the existence of disturbing negative social ties; weak family relationships; and the inability to initiate relationships with the right people who might share common interests (P7, P1, P23, P20, P16, P15, P17, P14, P10, P11, P41).

Finally, one participant underlined that not being familiar with (alienation) the culture and place one resides in is also a significant factor in loneliness;
"Maybe being far from what's familiar to you. Like being far from the place you were born and raised in. Because in that place, you know its culture, you know its customs. When you leave and go to a completely different place, you inevitably feel some loneliness. That's an important factor for me." (P10)

Definition of loneliness

When participants were asked about the definition of loneliness, most of the participants defined it as isolation or a sense of being alone (n=12), loneliness as a positive experience (n=8), disconnection from others (n=5), and lack of disclosure or sharing of positive and negative emotions (n=5).
As an example of loneliness as isolation, one participant stated that “I think it's like an experience where I don't even feel the need to communicate, or rather I feel like communicating won't make me feel any good, I feel useless, I feel isolated. It's like an island where there's no way out, it feels lonely. And my own shadow is there, and I'm not happy about it being there. But I can't escape it either. Or I can't get along with it either.” (P44). In contrast, responses on loneliness as positive focused on the need and benefits of being lonely. One respondent said “Well, I think loneliness is positive. Let me give you my own definition now. It's when a person can really, finally be with themselves, turn inward, produce something if they're going to produce it, I don't know, see the connections between such complex issues. For me, whenever I am alone, I experience such enlightenment about various things.” (P17). Definitions of loneliness in terms of disconnection described it as “...disconnection from people, from your environment, from your family, and from communication with others.” (P25). Lastly, loneliness as a lack of disclosure portrayed inability to share things as in the quote from one participant “I have a lot of people around me, but if I can’t share anything with anyone at that moment, that is loneliness.” (P33).



The difference between loneliness and solitude

In response to the question on the difference between loneliness and solitude, most of the respondents emphasized choice (n=7), activity engagement or distractions (n=5), and satisfaction or positive affect (n=6). On solitude as a choice, one respondent said "...feeling lonely is not something chosen, but being alone is something chosen. After all, since it is a choice, I don't think being alone will be something that upsets or makes you sad. Being alone may be a need for a person, but there is no need for loneliness." (P19). Responses on solitude as activity engagement focused on daily experiences such as "if I immerse myself in reading books, it helps distract me a bit, or if there's a program I like on TV and I watch it, my loneliness reduces somewhat." (P35). Solitude as a satisfaction or positive experience mentioned happy feelings such as "When I am alone but don't feel lonely, it usually means I'm in a good mood. I'm alone, but I don't feel sad at all." (P1). On the other hand, none of the responses were deemed to represent lack of witness, helplessness, inability to cope, social media, social comparison, or religion.

How are lonely individuals perceived among the target population?

Within the Turkish sample, lonely individuals are predominantly perceived through a set of negatively valenced traits. These include being socially withdrawn, misunderstood, ashamed, shy, and lacking effective communication skills. Participants frequently associated loneliness with heightened emotional sensitivity, fragility, disrespectfulness, aggressiveness, an imposing attitude, emotional instability, unhappiness, anger, impatience, low self-confidence, incompatibility, selfishness, narcissism, introversion, a diminished sense of belonging, and a lack of emotional resilience to initiate

or sustain relationships. Additional descriptors included being depressive, emotionally weak, repulsive, and arrogant. Some individuals were even described as deliberately embracing misery or as possessing a “difficult” personality.

A recurring theme in participants’ responses was that lonely individuals often lacked access to supportive social networks or people they could confide in. Many noted that these individuals not only closed themselves off from potential social bonds but also tended to conceal their loneliness from others. They were often characterized as people who refuse to seek help, show a lack of motivation to initiate or maintain social relationships, derive little satisfaction from existing relationships, exhibit pessimism, and tend to self-isolate.

Furthermore, the experience of loss and bereavement was frequently cited as a contributing factor to loneliness. Some participants suggested that lonely individuals may even become habituated to trauma or overthinking, deriving a paradoxical sense of familiarity or comfort from it.

Less commonly, loneliness was framed as a conscious and potentially positive lifestyle choice. A minority of participants emphasized that for some individuals, choosing solitude may not lead to unhappiness, but instead, a sense of fulfillment or inner peace. Additionally, it was noted that members of disadvantaged or minority groups may be more vulnerable to experiences of loneliness.

Why is loneliness difficult to be spoken about among the target population?

When participants were asked why talking about loneliness might be difficult, a considerable number (n = 12) stated that it was not difficult for them. One participant explained that, although talking about loneliness was not inherently difficult, their willingness to share depended on the person they were speaking to. This participant emphasized that concern over how the other person might feel after the conversation sometimes led them to remain silent: "It depends on the person. I am open about my thoughts, but if I feel that what I say might hurt or upset someone, I sometimes hold back"(P15). Similarly, another participant described this hesitation as the very factor that makes talking about loneliness challenging: "Because if I talk, it won't help anyone. It would just upset others, so I don't want to mention it much." (P35).

Nonetheless, there were also participants who explicitly stated that discussing loneliness was difficult for them (n = 13). One participant attributed this difficulty to an internal lack of strength or desire to confront or express their experience, even to themselves: "I don't have the strength or desire to share it with anyone, or with myself. How would I want to share it with someone else at that moment, or how could I establish a dialogue with someone beyond hello, hello? ***I think that is the epitome of loneliness. I can't even talk to myself.***" (P44). As this quote suggests, the inability to acknowledge one's loneliness, even internally, reflects a profound sense of disconnection. Another participant underscored this notion by stating that loneliness is something to be concealed: "Since they're lonely, they hide it because they can't say 'I'm lonely'." (P26).

These findings reveal the nuanced and multifaceted barriers individuals face when it comes to articulating feelings of loneliness. While some are open to discussing their experiences, many hesitate due to concerns about vulnerability, stigma, and the emotional impact on both themselves and others. This complexity underscores the need for creating safe and empathetic spaces where individuals feel supported in expressing such difficult emotions.

Culture-specific aspects of loneliness

When participants were asked whether loneliness had culturally specific aspects, one participant emphasized that belonging to a group is considered the norm in Türkiye due to the strength of communal ties: “In Türkiye, where communal ties are strong, loneliness stands out more. It feels different because being part of a group is the norm.” (P51). Two other participants responded by making comparisons between Türkiye and Europe. One participant suggested that people in Türkiye tend to be more socially connected than those in Europe: “The situation of people in Türkiye regarding loneliness is better than in Europe. People in Europe are not very connected socially, by family, or by environment. Our country, Turkish people, are 5-6 steps ahead of the West.” (P25). Another participant offered a more nuanced comparison, stating: “If you had asked about Europe, I might have said yes—people there are more accustomed to loneliness, they learn to stand on their own feet, they mature earlier. But in Türkiye, I don't see it the same way, especially when it comes to family ties and social development. However, I can say that some people in Türkiye experience loneliness due to political, financial, or economic conditions rather than social disconnection.” (P15). As this participant indicates, the underlying causes of loneliness may differ cross-culturally, with family ties and social dynamics playing a significant role in Türkiye, alongside unique contextual stressors.

Notably, eight participants linked loneliness in Türkiye directly to economic hardship. For example, one participant stated: "…Türkiye is not a place where you can easily utilize coping mechanisms to cope with loneliness. … You can't have a hobby in Türkiye. Everything is very expensive and you don't have money. You can't meet new people because you don't have money. You can't go out; you can't take a course. You can't go socializing, you can't go to a concert. You don't have money. Money is the beginning of everything, unfortunately" (P43). Another participant expressed a similar view: "Not all lonely people are poor. But I think all poor people are lonely. Because they have difficulty finding money to live on. How will they socialize? What will they do?" (P42). Similarly, another participant emphasized economic conditions as the main driver of loneliness in Türkiye: "If I focus on loneliness in Türkiye, I'd say the biggest cause of loneliness here is economic conditions. Sometimes people choose loneliness out of necessity. Fear of not being able to afford marriage. Fear of not being able to take care of a child if they have one, of not being enough for them. Being unhappy at work. Whether or not they receive support from their family." (P6). These statements suggest that worsening economic conditions are a recurrent theme in participants' experiences and perceptions of loneliness.

In addition to economic factors, some participants also pointed to the influence of the political climate. One participant stated: *"In Türkiye… political stances sometimes leave people feeling lonely. Our government controls everything, interferes with everything… When it's restricted, people get scared, and we create an antisocial, apolitical society."* (P28). Another participant similarly linked loneliness to the broader lack of empathy and increasing social polarization: *"We lack empathy. That's why everyone is moving away from each other. This leads to loneliness; as long as people do not listen to the other side, do not respect the other side's opinion, as long as everyone believes that their information is correct… This polarizes society; we are alone at that point. This is what we are experiencing today"* (P21).

Cultural expectations around aging and familial obligations were also mentioned as factors shaping experiences of loneliness. One participant emphasized that dependence on one's children in old age is culturally reinforced in Türkiye, and unmet expectations in this regard can lead to feelings of isolation: "I think people in Turkey are generally very dependent on their children. As they grow older, they expect their children to take care of them. But they can't accept that their children have their own lives and different experiences. This inability to accept that makes them feel lonely." (P24).

Interestingly, a participant reflected on how cultural narratives around loneliness have shifted over time. Referring to their youth, they remarked that loneliness used to be seen more positively, particularly within the framework of arabesque culture: "There was a time in our country, especially during my youth, for example in the arabesque culture, loneliness was something that was glorified a little. But in today's Turkey, this kind of thing is no longer on the agenda." (P34).

On the other hand, three participants explicitly stated that they did not believe loneliness had any culture-specific elements (P26, P20, P18).

In sum, participants' responses illustrate that cultural, economic, and political contexts significantly shape how loneliness is perceived and experienced in Türkiye. While some emphasize the protective effects of strong social and familial ties, others point to systemic barriers such as financial hardship, sociopolitical suppression, and shifting cultural norms as key contributors to loneliness in the Turkish context.

What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering their last instance of loneliness

When asked to describe why they answered what they answered when they spoke about the last instance they felt loneliness, Turkish participants often point to relational features such as weakened or broken interpersonal connections. These accounts often described emotional distance, separation, or lack of communication with close others such as partners, family members, or close friends. A recurring theme was the sense of unmet emotional needs and the absence of shared experiences or support in meaningful relationships (e.g., P4, P5, P11, P12, P13, P44). For instance, P5 said "I think it's because I feel like I can't fully share things sometimes. And honestly, I don't think I'm very well understood in my current life situation. That's clear to me." Others associated their loneliness with physical and social isolation. Being home alone, waking up without anyone around, or the absence of visitors were situations that triggered a sense of solitude (e.g., P35, P36, P37, P1, P18, P3, P2). P35 stated "I hadn't seen anyone for quite a while, no one had come by. That's why I felt that way. I felt lonely. I had worries and fears like if I get sick as I get older, no one will come, no one will take care of me. That's why, I thought, I'll be alone... No one will come, no one will care... I had such fears".

Several responses pointed to internal emotional struggles and a more psychological form of loneliness. Feelings of depression, emotional exhaustion, or heartbreak were cited as key elements in these accounts. In such cases, loneliness seemed less tied to external circumstances and more rooted in the individual's inner emotional state (e.g., P7, P6, P30, P39). P 30 stated "I mean, I'm really depressed" and another participant expressed a similar view, P7 said "I'm depressed right now. That's why, when you asked these questions, it reminded me of the discussions in therapy about friendships and loneliness. These topics are already quite familiar to me".

For some, loneliness emerged in the presence of others, stemming from a sense of not being understood or acknowledged. These participants described moments when their thoughts or emotions felt invisible to those around them, and when their efforts to express themselves received little or no meaningful response (e.g., P10, P20, P19, P43). For example, P20 shared, “I feel lonely when I’m with people who I know won’t understand me”. Lastly, a small group of participants reported that they did not feel lonely recently or in general (e.g., P14, P15, P26, P42). For example, P14 shared, "Maybe a long time ago, like during adolescence, but that would be over 20 years ago. I haven’t felt lonely in recent times."

Some responses revealed abstract or metaphorical interpretation. For example, P9 stated, “I felt naked, I felt completely naked like this... I was lying on a slope, lying completely naked like this. I felt so unprotected, so lonely.” This metaphorical language indicates that the participant drew on vivid emotional imagery to convey their understanding of loneliness, suggesting a subjective yet intense engagement with the item. Several participants described difficulty identifying a specific moment, often because of a generalized sense of chronic loneliness or confusion about their feelings. For example, P31 “So that's not something that I can answer very easily. A little bit of freaking stuff was going on. But what can I say, I don't want to depict it. Because it's something that comes with confusion. When I explain it here in this way, you find a completely different answer. But it's a bit like something, like no one can be where I am. It's kind of like a pinnacle deer of loneliness.” Such responses suggest that, while the item was understood, the construct of loneliness itself may be more diffuse or persistent for some individuals, complicating pinpointing a discrete time point.

Across these examples, participants demonstrated thoughtful and effortful cognitive processes, suggesting that the question was generally interpreted in line with its intended meaning.

What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what loneliness is for them

In response to the question “What is loneliness?”, participants' descriptions revealed a wide range of emotional, social, and cognitive processes. The most frequent response was the inability to share and a feeling of not being understood. 13 participants define loneliness as not being able to share feelings, not being understood or not being able to express oneself (e.g., P1, P3, P5, P17, P18, P19, P27, P28, P31, P32, P34, P40, P44). For instance, P44 said, “Not having anyone to share happy news with”. Loneliness was often (N = 8) defined not merely as physical isolation, but as a state of emotional disconnection (e.g., P4, P10, P21, P28, P36, P37, P35, P42). For example, P4 shared, “At that moment, I was thinking about how loneliness isn’t just about being physically alone—it’s about feeling emotionally stuck as well. Not having the person you love around, feeling emotionally trapped, was what I meant when I described it as emptiness.” Another common theme was the inability to form or maintain meaningful social bonds, which led to a deep sense of isolation (e.g., P13, P37, P29, P45). P13 stated, "For me, loneliness means a disconnection from people, from your environment, from your family, and from communication with others. It means a lack of value being given to you. You need to be an exhausted person, both mentally and physically". Others associated loneliness with feelings of being abandoned or worthless, often linked to past disappointments or losses (P10, P20, P26, P37, P42). For example, P26 said, “That no one will come for you”. Overall, the responses reflect the multifaceted and subjective nature of loneliness, with emotional disconnection and lack of meaningful interaction standing out as core elements of participants’ experiences.

One participant explicitly reflected on their cognitive approach to the question, stating: P43 “I just thought about the answer to that question. I mean, I thought about what loneliness is in my head. At that moment, it's something like this.” This response indicates a metacognitive process, in which the participant did not immediately recall an event but instead began by conceptually analyzing what loneliness means to them. Such introspective responses provide strong evidence of response process validity, as they show how participants actively engaged with the construct rather than simply retrieving a memory.

Another participant described engaging in a recall-based process when responding to the item: P34 “When I was defining loneliness, I thought about the times when I was alone. The times when I was alone were mostly when I thought that there were no people around me who would understand me.” This response suggests that the participant engaged in a response process involving the retrieval of relevant personal experiences to define the concept of loneliness, indicating a reliance on episodic memory as part of their response formulation.

Additional examples further illustrate the cognitive and emotional processes underlying participants’ responses. For instance, one participant, P7 noted: “Why did I answer that way? Again, because I’m feeling depressed. That’s how I perceive my own loneliness. Because I think this is a subjective question or answer. The answer I gave was quite subjective, at least.” This reflects metacognitive awareness and an emotional self-evaluation process, indicating that the response was shaped by the participant’s current affective state. Another participant, P22, explained: “I was thinking about the new people I’ve met here, my friends, my parents, the distance. The experiences there. Generally, [my] city is underneath it all. Maybe if I hadn’t felt a sense of belonging to [my] city, I might have thought differently about the experiences there.” This demonstrates a context-driven reflection, where

the respondent linked their experience of loneliness to changes in social environment and belonging. These examples support response process validity by showing that participants approached the question through reflective and personally meaningful pathways.

What are the response processes to leading to the participants answering what makes for a good social connection for them

When asked why they answered what they had answered about the characteristics of a good social connection, participants often reiterate the importance of the relational features. Many participants (N = 9) emphasized that trust is fundamental in forming and maintaining meaningful social bonds. Trust was often mentioned in relation to sharing secrets, feeling safe, or preventing betrayal (e.g., P8, P10, P11, P18, P21, P30, P32, P33, P37). Also, participants frequently (N = 7) referred to the need for being understood and being able to communicate openly. This includes fluency in conversation, mutual comprehension, and shared emotional language (e.g., P1, P4, P17, P31, P34, P39, P40). For example, P17 stated "Being understood, mutuality, and valuing each other". The other frequently mentioned response is respect (N = 6). It also included respecting personal space and valuing others' opinions (e.g., P8, P12, P14, P35, P36, P41). For instance, P35 said, "Tolerance, understanding, and not hurting anyone; Because that's how it should be if we want to build friendships or companionships... We need to be tolerant of everyone. We must respect everyone. Only then can friendships and companionships be formed". Also many responses (N = 7) underlined the importance of mutual care, shared values, and equality in the relationship. This included phrases like "moving in the same direction" "helping each other" or "shared goals" (e.g., P1, P4, P13, P15, P17, P27, P41). Lastly participants (N = 6) stressed that genuine interaction, selflessness, and being authentic are essential in forming strong social ties (e.g., P14, P15, P16, P24, P35, P36).

Several participants engaged in internal scanning of personal experiences, selectively recalling instances or relationships that epitomize meaningful social bonds, for instance, P2: "I thought about the closest thing to an ideal social bond in my own life and described that." Others demonstrated abstract cognitive reflection, contemplating general mechanisms of social

connection formation. For example, P3: "I was thinking about how social connections are formed". Some responses showed contextual situational recall, focusing on specific social environments such as familiar places or social circles. For example, P6: "I was thinking about certain places in [City A]. For example, there's a bar we always go to. I thought about that place. And I thought about how I am at school— How I'm more talkative, how I have people around me at school." Additionally, emotional appraisal of prior interactions influenced responses, with participants reflecting on feelings of trust or respect as key elements.

One participant explicitly reflected on their internal cognitive process when answering the question about social connection. P43 stated, "I thought about my own relationships. I thought about the relationships I wanted to have. I thought it should be like that."

What are the response processes leading to the participant answering the scale item of "I feel lonely" from 0-100

When responding to the question "I feel lonely," participants often referred to their present emotional state and patterns in their social environment. A significant number (N = 15) reported low levels of loneliness (0–15 out of a scale of 0-100), often justifying this by citing consistent support systems or an overall sense of contentment in their social lives. For example, P42, P21, P23 explicitly stated they "do not feel lonely at all," while P 24 simply responded with "never," indicating a firm disconnection from the experience of loneliness. Others in this group (e.g., P15, P31, P44) provided minimal numerical ratings (e.g., 7, 10, 12), reflecting rare and fleeting experiences of loneliness. A second group described their loneliness as moderate, generally falling within the 30–50 range. These participants often linked their feelings to situational factors. P40, for instance, rated their loneliness at 50 and explained that their sense of isolation fluctuates depending on whether or

not they are socially engaged on a given day: "I will say fifty. Because when I talk to my friends, it is not that much. When I am alone, I feel lonely." P20, who chose 45, mentioned difficulty in deciding on a number, indicating some ambivalence or variability in their experience. In contrast, participants who reported feeling severely lonely often used values above 70. Their descriptions revealed deeper emotional discomfort or unmet social needs. P 6[15] shared an 87 rating, while P 17 said 85, both reflecting a persistent feeling of disconnection. For P36, the rating reached 100, paired with the statement "I see myself alone," suggesting a profound sense of social absence. These higher scores were frequently accompanied by reflections on longing for emotional intimacy or frustration with unfulfilled relationships. Altogether, the data reveals a spectrum of loneliness experiences, from complete absence to intense and chronic emotional solitude.

Some participants demonstrated internal calibration and numerical estimation, adjusting their answers while reflecting on their subjective emotional state e.g., P22 "About that... I'm not very lonely, so I give it a 40. Actually, it's more than 40. I give it 35". Others appeared to engage in contrastive evaluation, referencing specific situations—such as being with friends versus being alone—to determine their level of loneliness. For example, P40, "I will say fifty. Because when I talk to my friends, it is not that much. When I am alone, I feel lonely". These responses reflect situational awareness and conditional reasoning. Additionally, several participants reflected on the adequacy of their social support, suggesting that their perceived loneliness was influenced by the availability of people to talk to, rather than by objective isolation. For instance, P41: "I feel a little lonely because that's understood. When I need to talk, I have... I have". While a few responses were largely intuitive or based on affective immediacy, many participants demonstrated metacognitive engagement, showing that their answers were formed through a reflective process that integrated emotional awareness, contextual cues, and numerical scaling.

Notes

[P1] TR_MML_high_35-60_Single_Female_Suzan_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P2] TR_MML_ Median-High_18-35_Single_Female_Cansu_1checked_deidentified_2checked_Dinosaur
[P3] TR_NL_ Low-Median _35-60_Partnered_Female_Cansu_1checked_deidentified_2checked_Deniz
[P4] TR_NL_ Low-Median _35-60_Partnered_Female_Cansu_Deniz
[P5] TR_MML_low_18-35_Partnered_Female_Suzan_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P6] TR_NL_Low-Median_35-60_Single_Male_Cansu_1checked_deidentified_2checked_Poyraz
[P7] TR_MML_Low-Median_35-60_Partnered_Female_Cansu_1checked_deidentified_2checked_Tombi
[P8] TR_NL_ Low-Median_18-35_ Partnered_Male_Cansu_1checked_deidentified_2checked_TSK
[P9] TR_NL_Median-High_35-60_Partnered_Female_Gulcin_deidentified_1checked_Funda
[P10] TR_SL_low_18-35_Single_Male_Suzan_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P11] TR_SL_low_18-35_Single_Female_Suzan_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P12] TR_MML_low_35-60_Partnered_Female_Suzan_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P13] TR_NL_high_18-35_Partnered_Male_Emre_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P14] TR_NL_low_18-35_Partnered_Female_Suzan_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P15] TR_NL_high_35-60_Partnered_Female_Suzan_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P16]TR_MML_low_18-35_Single_Female_Duygu_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P17] TR_NL_high_35-60_Partnered_Female_Duygu_1checked_deidentified_2checked_Lavender
[P18]TR_NL_low_35-60_Partnered_Female_Duygu_1checked_deidentified_2checked_Luna
[P19] TR_NL_low_35-60_Single_Female_Duygu_1checked_deidentified_2checked_sherlock
[P20]TR_NL_high_60>_Single_Female_Duygu_1checked_deidentified_2checked_Poyraz
[P21] TR_NL_high_18-35_Single_Male_Emre_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P22] TR_NL_high_35-60_Single_Female_Emre_1checked_deidentified_2checked

Notes

[P23] TR_NL_low_18-35_Partnered_Female_Emre_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P24] TR_SL_Low_18-35_Partnered_Female_FatihYavuz_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P25] TR_MML_Low_35-60_Partnered_Male_FatihYavuz_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P26] TR_MML_Low_35-60_Partnered_Male_FatihYavuz2_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P27] TR_NL_High_35-60_Partnered_Female_FatihYavuz_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P28] TR_MML_High_35-60_Partnered_Male_FatihYavuz_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P29] TR_SL_Low_18-35_Single_Male_FatihYavuz_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P30]TR_MML_High_35-60_Partnered_Male_Seher_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P31] TR_NL_Low_18-35_Single_Male_Seher_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P32] TR_MML_Low _18-35_Single_Female_Seher_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P33] TR_MML_High_18-35_Partnere_Male_Seher_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P34] TR_MML_Low_35-60_Partnered_Male_Seher_1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P35] TR_SL_Low_60_Single_Female_Seray_1checked - deidentified_Türkan
[P36] TR_SL_Low_60+_Married_Female_Seray_1checked - deidentified_hatice
[P37] TR_SL_Low_60-70_Single_Female_Seray_1checked - deidentified.
[P38] TR_MML_Low_18-35_Partnered_Female_Seher
[P39] TR_MML_Low_18-35_Single_Female_Seher
[P40] TR_NL_High_35-60_Partnered_Male_Seher1checked_deidentified_2checked
[P41] TR_MML_high_35-60_Partnered_Male_Büşra_Deidentifed_Translated
[P42] TR_MML_Single_18-35_Male_Büşra_Deidentified_Translated
[P43] TR_NL_18-35_Single_Female_Büşra_Deidentified_Translated
[P44] TR_NL_low_18-35_Single_Male_Büşra_Deidentifed_Translated
[P45] TR_SL_18-35_Single_Male_Büşra_Deidentified_Translated

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Multi-Country Investigation into the Conceptualization and Experience of Social Connection, Social Isolation, and Loneliness