

# Experiences of Social Exclusion in Latvia: A Post-Pandemic Perspective Across Generations and Social Groups

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**Abstract.** Social exclusion is a multifaceted concept that refers to individuals' inability to participate fully in society due to various structural and personal barriers, such as poverty, limited education, unemployment, and discrimination. Excluded individuals often face obstacles in exercising their rights and accessing opportunities, including social stigma and emotional or physical abuse. These experiences can lead to psychological distress, including heightened anger and irritability particularly among those who were physically isolated during the COVID-19 quarantine. Despite its significance, social exclusion remains under researched, especially in terms of how its dimensions intersect and compound one another. This study aims to evaluate the causes of social exclusion and the interrelationship between its dimensions, with a focus on the Latvian context. A survey was conducted among diverse social groups-parents, students, teachers, pupils, and others to explore their perceptions and personal experiences of exclusion. The findings reveal that social exclusion often arises during periods of life transition, such as parental leave, job loss, or changes in educational environments. The COVID-19 pandemic and evolving communication habits, particularly the shift toward digital interaction, were identified as key contributors to exclusion. The study highlights that the dimensions of social exclusion such as isolation, economic exclusion, and cultural exclusion are closely interlinked, with one often serving as a precursor to another. These insights underscore the need for holistic approaches to understanding and addressing social exclusion in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** digital communication, cultural exclusion, economic exclusion, institutional exclusion, labour market exclusion, social exclusion; social isolation, social connectedness, spatial exclusion

## Introduction

A study by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), titled 'Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education' (2021), underscores how the COVID-19 pandemic revealed both the fragility of global systems and the essential human need for interconnectedness. It calls for urgent collective action to ensure that every child, young person, and adult has the opportunity to thrive and contribute to

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a sustainable future. In the aftermath of the pandemic, a noticeable shift in social behaviour has emerged. Many individuals have become increasingly reluctant to engage in social interactions, opting instead for isolation and significantly reducing their communication with others (Kindren & Bates, 2023; Elbay et al., 2020). This trend has prompted society to re-evaluate the importance of socialising—an aspect of life that was previously taken for granted. While not all instances of social exclusion can be attributed solely to the pandemic, research indicates that physical isolation during quarantine periods was associated with heightened levels of anger and irritability (Hossain et al., 2020). The concept of social isolation has been extensively examined in the context of the pandemic, particularly in relation to public mental health strategies. However, a broader review of the literature reveals that social isolation is a multidimensional phenomenon that predates COVID-19 and manifests across various contexts. Central to this discussion is the notion of social connectedness, which plays a vital role in individual development, health, and societal wellbeing.

In his influential work *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman (2001) highlights that social exclusion remains an underexplored concept, with its most critical aspect being the individual's subjective experience of disconnection from society. This includes both a lack of meaningful communication and, in some cases, complete social withdrawal. Riesman argues that social exclusion is not only a psychological or economic issue but also a cultural phenomenon. He observes that in affluent middle-class settings, physical and social separation is often institutionalized—for example, through the construction of private homes with fences and the minimization of neighbourly interaction.

According to Riesman, the most common drivers of social exclusion include mental health challenges, distinctive personal traits, voluntary or involuntary isolation, excessive reliance on technology, economic hardship, and ethnic differences (Riesman, 2001, pp. 3–6). These factors underscore the complex and multifactorial nature of social exclusion, which intersects with both individual circumstances and broader societal structures.

The primary objective of this research is to examine the underlying causes of social exclusion and explore the interconnections among its various dimensions—namely, exclusion from the labour market, economic exclusion, cultural exclusion, isolation, spatial exclusion, and institutional exclusion. Particular emphasis is placed on understanding how the post-pandemic effects of COVID-19 have influenced these causes within the Latvian context. To achieve this, a comprehensive survey was conducted, gathering insights from individuals across diverse social groups and generations. The participant pool included parents, students, teachers, pupils, and individuals who identified themselves as belonging to other social categories. This inclusive approach enabled the study to capture a wide range of personal experiences and perceptions related to social exclusion, thereby enriching the analysis of its multifaceted nature in a post-pandemic society.

This study is guided by three primary research questions:

- a. What are the key drivers of social exclusion in Latvia, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath?
- b. In what ways do the various dimensions of social exclusion—such as isolation, economic hardship, and cultural marginalisation—interact and reinforce one another across different social groups and generations?
- c. How have evolving communication practices, especially the shift toward digital interaction, shaped individuals' experiences and perceptions of social exclusion?

In the Latvian context, several population groups are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion. These include pensioners—especially women and those living alone—individuals approaching retirement age, large and single-parent families, children, and others (Labklājības ministrija, 2020).

However, accurately determining the number of individuals at risk of social exclusion remains challenging, as exclusion can occur in various contexts and at different stages of life.

Consequently, this study does not focus exclusively on these vulnerable groups. Nonetheless, representatives from these populations—such as pensioners—were included among the survey respondents.

## Literature review

Social exclusion, as defined by Kronauer (2002), encompasses six interrelated dimensions: exclusion from the labour market, economic exclusion, cultural exclusion, isolation, spatial exclusion, and institutional exclusion. These dimensions often overlap, with one form of exclusion potentially leading to another. This study places particular emphasis on the dimension of isolation, given its prominence in both the literature and the lived experiences of respondents.

Social exclusion is a multifaceted concept that refers to the inability of individuals to fully participate in societal life due to various structural and personal barriers. These barriers may include poverty, limited access to education, unemployment, discrimination, and other socio-economic disadvantages. Individuals who are socially excluded often face restrictions in exercising their rights and accessing opportunities, largely due to factors such as social stigma, emotional and physical abuse, and systemic inequalities. This exclusion can result in difficulties in securing adequate income and accessing essential services and resources necessary for meaningful social participation across different life stages. The concept of social exclusion was first formally introduced by René Lenoir in 1974 (Lenoir, 1974), initially in the context of social divisions. In the 21st century, its scope has expanded to encompass the effects of globalisation, transformations in the labour market, shifts in employment status, evolving welfare policies, and broader societal changes (LU Filozofijas un socioloģijas institūts et al., 2007). Social exclusion may also stem from specific socio-economic conditions such as poverty, unemployment, and cultural marginalisation.

Importantly, social isolation—defined not as a voluntary choice but as physical separation from others—has emerged as a significant contributor to social exclusion (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Lee et al., 2020). This dimension underscores the complex interplay between individual experiences and broader societal structures, reinforcing the need for a multidimensional approach to understanding and addressing social exclusion.

Wolff et al. (2020) caution against reducing the concept of social exclusion to merely social isolation or physical distancing, as such a narrow perspective risks overlooking its deeper psychological and societal consequences. A more comprehensive understanding requires attention to psychological factors, including individuals' struggles with adapting to change and modifying daily routines. Magee and Smith (2013) further emphasize that social exclusion can stem from the exercise of power and emotional abuse, highlighting its relational and affective dimensions. Hodgetts and Stolte (2014) define social exclusion primarily in terms of diminished social connectedness, which encompasses the weakening of social bonds rooted in shared beliefs, interests, and values. These bonds are often shaped by feelings of familiarity (closeness and proximity) or unfamiliarity (distance and difference) between individuals and members of various social, ethnic, occupational, or religious groups.

Bottero (2004) adds an economic and spatial dimension to the discussion, underscoring the role of social stratification in perpetuating exclusion. For instance, residing in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods can reinforce both social and material marginalisation. Importantly, social exclusion should not be viewed as a fixed or static condition. Individuals retain the capacity to reshape their affiliations and social relationships across different contexts, suggesting that exclusion is both situational and potentially reversible.

## Methodology

A survey was selected as the primary research method due to its effectiveness in capturing the characteristics of a large population. The anonymity afforded by the survey encouraged respondents to share their experiences openly and honestly—an essential consideration given the sensitivity of the topic.

To gather diverse perspectives on social exclusion, a questionnaire was distributed to all lower secondary and secondary pupils, teachers, technical staff, and parents at one comprehensive school in Latvia, as well as to students and lecturers at a regional higher education institution. Participation in the survey was entirely voluntary, and all responses were treated with strict confidentiality.

Respondents were invited to self-identify with one of the predefined social groups—parents, students, teachers, pupils—or to select the category of ‘other respondents,’ with the option to specify their social role (e.g., nurse, social worker). The predefined social groups—parents, students, teachers, and pupils—were selected based on their direct involvement in educational and familial environments, which are contexts where social exclusion can manifest. These groups represent different generations and roles within society, allowing for a cross-sectional view of experiences and perceptions related to social exclusion. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, it is likely that some individuals chose not to participate. Therefore, a convenience sampling method was employed to ensure accessibility and inclusivity within the study, which, while practical and accessible, has inherent limitations, e.g. a lack of generalizability—since participants are not randomly selected, the sample may not fully represent the broader population. This can introduce sampling bias, particularly if certain social groups are over or under-represented. To address these limitations, the study incorporated several bias-mitigation strategies: diverse group inclusion (parents, students, teachers, pupils, and others (e.g., pensioners, social workers)—to ensure a broad spectrum of perspectives); pilot testing (the questionnaire was tested with individuals from varied backgrounds, including retired teachers and parents, to refine the instrument and enhance its content validity); ethical safeguards (anonymity and voluntary participation were emphasized to encourage honest and open responses, reducing the risk of social desirability bias); institutional diversity (data were collected from both a comprehensive school and a regional higher education institution, selected to reflect regional experiences and avoid urban bias). These measures helped strengthen the credibility, inclusiveness, and contextual relevance of the findings, despite the limitations of the sampling approach.

To ensure the questionnaire was both effective and valid, it was carefully constructed to encourage high response rates and included a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions. Content validity was strengthened through a pilot test involving 14 participants from the Erasmus+ project ‘Overcoming Social Distancing.’ These individuals possessed relevant knowledge of the research topic and represented a diverse range of social groups, including parents, students, teachers, and pupils. Notably, seven of the pilot participants were pensioners—four of whom were parents, six retired teachers, and one a retired nurse—reflecting a cross-generational perspective. Feedback from these interviews informed revisions to the questionnaire, resulting in a refined and finalized instrument tailored to the study’s objectives.

The finalized questionnaire was distributed among teachers, lower secondary and secondary pupils, technical staff, and parents at a comprehensive school in Latvia, as well as students and lecturers at a regional higher education institution. In total, 477 individuals participated in the survey, representing approximately one-seventh of the target population. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the sensitivity of the subject matter, a convenience sampling approach was adopted. While this limits the generalizability of the findings, it enabled

the inclusion of diverse perspectives from accessible and willing participants, thereby enriching the depth and relevance of the data collected.

The selection of the comprehensive school and the regional higher education institution was guided by their suitability for capturing diverse perspectives on social exclusion. Both institutions were chosen from outside the capital city to reflect regional experiences more accurately. The comprehensive school was selected for its inclusive educational structure, offering primary, lower secondary, and secondary education, and for its demonstrated engagement with parents and support for students with disabilities. This made it an ideal setting for exploring social exclusion across different age groups and roles within the educational environment. The higher education institution met the criteria of offering at least four academic disciplines and being regionally based, ensuring a broad representation of student and faculty experiences. These characteristics aligned with the study's aim to investigate social exclusion across generations and social roles in varied educational contexts.

All ethical standards were rigorously upheld throughout the research process. This included ensuring voluntary participation, obtaining informed consent, maintaining participant anonymity and data confidentiality, and transparently communicating the study's purpose and results. Formal permissions were secured from the management of the participating educational institutions, and, where applicable, consent was obtained from parents of pupils involved in the study. These measures were implemented to safeguard the rights and well-being of all participants, particularly given the sensitive nature of the research topic.

The questionnaire was carefully structured to align with the study's objectives (Geske & Grīnfelds, 2020), enabling the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS, which included the application of descriptive statistics and the Kruskal–Wallis test to identify statistically significant differences across respondent groups. For the qualitative component, content analysis was conducted. This process involved systematically coding descriptive responses, categorising them into thematic groups, and identifying recurring patterns and dimensions of social exclusion

## Results

The largest proportion of respondents (209) identified themselves as belonging to the social group 'parents', followed by 159 respondents who classified themselves as 'teachers' or 'lecturers', and 72 as 'students'. The least represented group was 'pupils', with only 25 participants. Additionally, 12 respondents selected the category 'other', providing further clarification of their roles: four identified as grandmothers, two as grandfathers, and one each as a social worker, audiologist, employee, adult, nurse, and a woman without children.

Notably, one-third of all respondents (160) reported having experienced social exclusion.

In terms of daily communication habits, the data reveal that teachers (77.4%) and students (63.9%) predominantly prefer face-to-face interaction, compared to pupils (52%). Notably, 20% of pupils reported that they most often communicate using a combination of face-to-face and written correspondence, suggesting a more hybrid approach to interaction. Parents also show a relatively high preference for face-to-face communication (56.9%), though a significant portion (34.9%) rely on correspondence, possibly reflecting time constraints or digital habits.

Interestingly, the 'other' respondent group—comprising pensioners and respondents in non-educational roles—shows a more balanced distribution across communication types, with 58.3% preferring face-to-face interaction and 25% relying on correspondence. This may reflect generational differences or varying levels of digital literacy. Overall, the data suggest that professional roles and age groups influence communication preferences, with younger and

more digitally engaged groups leaning toward mixed or remote forms of interaction (see Table 1).

*Table 1. Daily communication habits of respondents (N = 477)*

| Type of Communication           | All Respondents |      | Separately in Groups of Respondents |      |          |      |          |      |        |      |       |      |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|------|-------------------------------------|------|----------|------|----------|------|--------|------|-------|------|
|                                 |                 |      | Parents                             |      | Students |      | Teachers |      | Pupils |      | Other |      |
|                                 | N               | %    | N                                   | %    | N        | %    | N        | %    | N      | %    | N     | %    |
| Face-to-face                    | 308             | 64.6 | 119                                 | 56.9 | 46       | 63.9 | 123      | 77.4 | 13     | 52.0 | 7     | 58.3 |
| By correspondence               | 132             | 27.7 | 73                                  | 34.9 | 20       | 27.8 | 30       | 18.9 | 6      | 24.0 | 3     | 25.0 |
| face-to-face and correspondence | 26              | 5.5  | 11                                  | 5.3  | 4        | 5.6  | 4        | 2.5  | 5      | 20.0 | 2     | 16.7 |
| Other                           | 11              | 2.3  | 6                                   | 2.9  | 2        | 2.8  | 2        | 1.3  | 1      | 4.0  | -     | -    |

The Kruskal–Wallis test revealed statistically significant differences in daily communication habits among respondent groups ( $p = 0.001$ ). Specifically, face-to-face communication was more commonly preferred by teachers and parents, whereas pupils and students showed a greater tendency to communicate via correspondence. However, no statistically significant differences were found in responses to the question: ‘How often do you encounter situations when someone does not want to communicate with you?’—indicating that perceived social rejection was not strongly associated with communication style.

### *3.1. The Analysis of Respondents’ Experiences of Social Exclusion*

To explore how respondents conceptualize social exclusion, respondents were invited to articulate their understanding of the term by answering the open-ended question: ‘How do you understand or define social exclusion?’ The responses were analysed using qualitative content analysis, guided by Kronauer’s (2002) typology, which identifies six interrelated dimensions of social exclusion: labour market exclusion, economic exclusion, cultural exclusion, isolation, spatial exclusion, and institutional exclusion.

The content analysis followed Krippendorff’s (2018) methodology. First, all responses were transcribed and reviewed to identify descriptive phrases and recurring patterns. These were then coded and grouped into thematic categories aligned with Kronauer’s framework. Each response was assigned one or more exclusion dimensions based on its content. The coding process was iterative, allowing for refinement of categories and ensuring consistency across interpretations. To enhance reliability, researchers re-viewed the coding scheme and resolved discrepancies through discussion.

Notably, the dimension of isolation emerged as the most frequently referenced theme. Many respondents emphasized the transformation of communication practices—particularly the shift toward digital interaction—as a key factor contributing to social disconnection. This included reduced face-to-face engagement, increased reliance on digital platforms, and a perceived decline in interpersonal communication, often accompanied by discomfort or reluctance to engage socially.

The qualitative data presented in Table 2 underscore isolation as the dominant lens through which respondents perceive social exclusion. Key indicators of this theme include: social withdrawal, reduced face-to-face communication, feelings of non-belonging, digital communication replacing interpersonal interaction.

These patterns suggest that respondents primarily associate social exclusion with: shifts in communication habits (e.g., digitalization), social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, emotional or psychological barriers to social integration.

Additionally, 24 respondents explicitly stated that they did not know what social exclusion is, indicating a gap in awareness or understanding that may itself reflect aspects of exclusion.

**Table 2. Categorization of Respondents' Definitions of Social Exclusion According to Kronauer's Dimensions**

| Category/n                                                           | Qualitative Excerpts from Survey Responses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Generalisation/ Social Exclusion Dimension                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Social Withdrawal Due to Circumstantial or Voluntary Factors (n=117) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When there is no communication at your work, with friends, etc.</li> <li>• When people no longer communicate with each other but live just for themselves.</li> <li>• The process during which a person is forced to refuse face-to-face communication.</li> <li>• As a result of some circumstances (for example, health, appearance, changing jobs) or external events (for example, moving house, restrictions, graduation), communication with different groups of people (family, colleagues, friends, acquaintances, neighbours) is limited to a minimum.</li> <li>• Inability to feel comfortable among certain social groups due to various reasons, namely, fear, exclusion, shame, difference in social status, difference in level of well-being, cultural differences, etc.</li> <li>• Feeling like you do not fit into a community.</li> <li>• Feeling of isolation.</li> </ul> | Isolation                                                                                                   |
| Progressing Social Detachment (n=98)                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People are meeting each other less.</li> <li>• Less talking and communicating.</li> <li>• Isolation of a person or group of persons from social processes.</li> <li>• Isolation of the individual from society or from a particular microenvironment.</li> <li>• Exclusion from society, failure to fit into society due to economic status, unwillingness to be in society.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Isolation                                                                                                   |
| Perceived Social Non-Belonging/44                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of not belonging, fear of being different from others, not accepted.</li> <li>• Fear of speaking to people, dislike for large gatherings of people.</li> <li>• A sense of non-belonging to a community, a sense of exclusion.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                             |
| A deep sense of social estrangement/11                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No one understands me, feeling alien amongst familiar and unfamiliar people.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                             |
| Disengagement from shared cultural and societal practices/68         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distancing oneself from society and public mass cultural events, preferring solitude or communicating within a very narrow circle of acquaintances or friends.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Cultural Exclusion                                                                                          |
| Exclusion/43                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When someone is excluded from the group... not accepted. Exclusion from a particular group.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Exclusion from the labour market;<br>Economic exclusion,<br>Cultural exclusion,<br>Institutional exclusion. |
| Social network dominance/lack of Face-to-face communication/72       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People communicate more through technologies.</li> <li>• People do not meet each other but communicate through social networking platforms.</li> <li>• People increasingly obtain information and communicate through devices. As a result, social abilities are lost. A different communication culture is formed.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Spatial isolation                                                                                           |

Out of the 477 respondents, 160 reported having experienced social exclusion. While respondents from all surveyed social groups encountered such experiences, teachers were the most affected. Specifically, 62 teachers—representing 39% of the teacher group—reported feeling socially excluded. Among students, 24 out of 72 (33%) indicated similar experiences, followed by 31% of parents ( $n = 209$ ). Additionally, three respondents from the 'other' category

( $n = 12$ ) reported instances of exclusion. Pupils were the least affected group, with only six out of 25 acknowledging experiences of social exclusion.

Teachers identified several contributing factors to their sense of exclusion. Prominent among these were the effects of smart device usage in communication and the shift to distance learning necessitated by COVID-19 restrictions. Their responses highlighted barriers to interpersonal interaction, including a reluctance to engage socially (“I do not communicate outside working hours because I do not want to”), feelings of isolation (“I feel alone and I am alone”), and the impact of pandemic-related measures (“COVID time and consequences”; “When someone ‘sits’ on the phone in my presence”). Some teachers also described exclusion within the workplace, referring to the emergence of cliques or “herds.”

Students, on the other hand, frequently cited changes in their learning environment and the broader impact of the pandemic on daily life. Their comments reflected challenges such as unfamiliar social settings (“Situations where you have to seek contact with people you do not know”), limited opportunities for socializing due to academic demands, and transitional experiences like moving to university (“Going to university, leaving my old school and classmates”). Economic factors also played a role (“Running out of finances ... If you have money, you have friends!”), as did the isolation brought on by remote communication during the pandemic (“During the COVID-19 pandemic, when most of the communication was remote, one did not have to leave the house”).

These findings underscore the importance of educators’ qualifications, emotional intelligence, and experience in providing appropriate support to students, which is particularly important during periods of transition and crisis (Medne et al., 2024).

Similarly, parents’ responses highlighted the role of digital technologies and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on daily life, as well as feelings of isolation during parental leave. Several parents expressed that their experiences of social exclusion were linked to factors such as a child’s illness, pandemic-related restrictions, reluctance to engage in face-to-face communication, and the paradox of isolation in a digitally connected world.

Examples from parents’ responses include:

- impact of COVID-19 on everyday life (“When children are sick for a longer time, we try to go out in public less to avoid catching a new virus until immunity stabilises”).
- impact of social media on real-life interaction (“People give ‘likes’ to photos but don’t say hello on the street. Communication is formal, and people avoid meeting. Everyone is absorbed in their own lives”).
- self-imposed isolation (“I don’t like large gatherings or strangers. I prefer staying at home. I often ignore phone calls and send messages instead”).
- isolation during parental leave (“When my third child was born, I felt completely alone, without any opportunity to socialise.”; “After the birth of my first child, I lost contact with former friends. My social circle shrank to a minimum”).
- impact of smart device use on communication (“In the evenings, instead of talking, everyone in the family is on their smartphones, and we struggle to find topics for meaningful conversation.”; “Digitalisation has replaced real communication with remote interaction, leading to alienation even among close family members” (impact of smart device use on communication).

These insights further illustrate how digitalisation, health-related concerns, and major life transitions—such as parental leave—can contribute to social exclusion among parents.

Among other social groups, an adult respondent noted that social isolation can stem from personal choice, stating, “when I do not want to communicate with other people” – a social worker identified job loss as a key factor contributing to experience of social exclusion.

One respondent, a woman without children, reflected on the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on her social life. She shared:

“I noticed this when the pandemic restrictions were lifted, and I thought life would return to its previous rhythm—with events and meetings, drinking coffee together, shopping with girlfriends... But during that time, people had developed different habits. So that I don’t have to sit at home alone, I often go to events I want to attend—alone. I no longer ask if anyone wants to join me, because 90% of the time, they don’t. I’ve also developed new habits after the pandemic—I don’t ask anymore, I just go and do it myself.”

This account highlights how the pandemic not only disrupted social routines but also reshaped long-term social behaviours and expectations, reinforcing the theme of social exclusion in a post-pandemic context.

In contrast, pupils who reported experiencing social exclusion often attributed it to the nature of written communication, such as messaging only when something is needed (e.g., “People only send a message when they need something”). Notably, none of the pupils mentioned emotional violence as a contributing factor to their exclusion.

Only one student respondent shared a more detailed account of exclusion, both during school and in a professional setting:

“When I was learning at school, my classmates made fun of me a lot. I did not understand the reasons for their attitude, nor how I could have behaved to fit in with them, so I was left out. While working on the ship, I was among intellectually and mentally uneducated and immature people, so I was humiliated because of national differences, different attitudes towards work, and unprofessionalism, as I was an apprentice. At the moment, I have strengthened and nurtured my emotional and mental capacity, so I feel like a ‘social butterfly’. There are no social circles where I do not fit in at least for 50%.”

This reflection suggests that students may be reluctant to discuss experiences of social exclusion openly, possibly due to a lack of awareness or discomfort in addressing such issues.

Overall, the data analysis reveals that teachers most frequently associate social exclusion with the use of smart devices in communication and the restrictive measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors have contributed to a reluctance to engage in interpersonal communication and have fostered feelings of exclusion within the professional environment.

Students frequently experience social exclusion due to significant changes in their environment when beginning studies in a new city, often far from home. Contributing factors include financial constraints during their studies and the restrictive measures imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Parents, on the other hand, report feeling socially excluded due to the influence of smartphone use on communication, the effects of COVID-19 containment measures, the impact of social media on real-life interactions, and the isolation experienced during parental leave.

Respondents from other social groups most commonly attributed their experiences of social exclusion to the restrictive measures introduced during the pandemic and a general reluctance to engage in interpersonal communication.

Among all groups, pupils reported the lowest incidence of social exclusion (six out of 25 respondents). Those who did report such experiences cited the influence of smart device use on communication and a lack of acceptance by peers or respondents from other cultural backgrounds as contributing factors.

### *3.2. The Analysis of Reasons for and Consequences of Social Exclusion*

To examine the situations in which respondents felt socially excluded, a content analysis of their responses was conducted. The data were categorised according to the dimensions of social exclusion defined by Kronauer (2002) (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Categorization of Social Exclusion Experiences by Respondent Group and Dimension  
(Based on Kronauer's Typology)**

| Respondent Group  | Category                                        | Social Exclusion Dimension(s)                                        |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Teachers          | Impact of Smart Devices on Communication        | Isolation                                                            |
|                   | COVID-19 Containment Measures                   | Isolation                                                            |
|                   | Respondents' Unwillingness to Communicate       | Self-isolation                                                       |
|                   | Exclusion in the Work Environment               | Cultural Exclusion, Economic Exclusion                               |
| Students          | Change of Environment and Financial Constraints | Cultural Exclusion, Economic Exclusion, Isolation, Spatial Exclusion |
|                   | COVID-19 Containment Measures                   | Isolation                                                            |
| Parents           | Impact of Smart Devices on Communication        | Social Isolation in a Digitally Connected World                      |
|                   | COVID-19 Containment Measures                   | Isolation                                                            |
|                   | Isolation During Parental Leave                 | Isolation, Cultural Exclusion, Economic Exclusion                    |
|                   | Preference for Staying at Home                  | Isolation                                                            |
|                   | Impact of Social Media on Real Life             | Isolation, Cultural Exclusion                                        |
| Other Respondents | COVID-19 Containment Measures                   | Cultural Exclusion, Economic Exclusion                               |
|                   | Respondents' Unwillingness to Communicate       | Isolation                                                            |
| Pupils            | Impact of Smart Devices on Communication        | Social Isolation in a Digitally Connected World                      |
|                   | Non-Acceptance by Peers and Other Cultures      | Cultural Exclusion                                                   |

The categorization of responses in Table 3 reveals that isolation is the most prevalent dimension of social exclusion across all respondent groups. Teachers and parents most frequently associated their exclusion with the impact of digital communication and COVID-19 containment measures, while students emphasized environmental transitions and financial constraints. Pupils, although the least affected group, highlighted cultural exclusion stemming from peer non-acceptance and digital communication habits. The data also show that social exclusion is often multifactorial, with overlapping dimensions such as cultural, economic, and spatial exclusion emerging in tandem with isolation. These findings underscore the importance of contextual factors—such as life stage, professional role, and technological engagement—in shaping respondents' experiences of exclusion. They also reinforce the need for targeted interventions that address both structural and interpersonal barriers to social inclusion.

## Discussion

The analysis of survey data reveals that the dimensions of social exclusion are deeply interrelated and often mutually reinforcing. The findings revealed that isolation was the most frequently cited dimension, often intertwined with economic, cultural, and spatial exclusion. For example, digital isolation could lead to economic marginalisation and reduced cultural participation. These dimensions were not isolated but mutually reinforcing, especially during periods of vulnerability. These findings support Kronauer's (2002) assertion that social exclusion is a multidimensional phenomenon, where one form of exclusion can trigger or intensify others. For example, the dominance of digital communication—especially among younger respondents—can lead to self-isolation and reduced face-to-face interaction. This shift in communication habits, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, may contribute to exclusion from the labour market, economic marginalisation, and diminished cultural participation. Teachers and parents, in particular, reported feeling excluded due to the overuse of smart devices and the distancing effects of remote learning and digital engagement.

Importantly, the data also highlight that social exclusion is not always imposed externally; some respondents described voluntary withdrawal from social interaction. This

aligns with Barry's (1998) distinction between voluntary and involuntary exclusion. Further research is needed to explore the psychological and contextual factors that lead respondents to choose isolation, including discomfort with social norms, mental health challenges, or a preference for solitude. The most commonly cited causes of social exclusion across groups include: voluntary or forced isolation, poverty and unemployment, mental and physical health problems, difficulty adapting to change, lack of shared values or cultural belonging, social stratification and unequal environments, excessive reliance on technology. Among pupils, exclusion was often linked to peer rejection and cultural differences, while students emphasized transitions in their learning environment and financial hardship. Finn (1989) underscores the importance of a safe and inclusive school climate, where peer interaction and positive perceptions of school life can mitigate social isolation and improve educational outcomes. The concepts of social isolation and loneliness, while distinct, are closely connected. Moeller and Seehuus (2019) note that loneliness often arises during life transitions—a pattern reflected in this study, where respondents reported exclusion during parental leave, job loss, and educational transitions.

The changing social environment, shaped by digitalisation and pandemic-related restrictions, has significantly influenced communication habits. Isolation was not only a consequence of physical distancing but also of emotional withdrawal and reduced interpersonal engagement. Teachers experienced exclusion due to technological barriers and workplace dynamics; students due to relocation and financial stress; and parents due to the isolating effects of parental leave and digital communication within families.

Children and young people affected by social exclusion face a range of challenges, including academic difficulties, early school leaving, unemployment, substance use, legal issues, and poor mental health (Bynner, 1999). These effects are often compounded when parents themselves are socially excluded.

Given the pervasive and harmful consequences of social exclusion—including emotional dysregulation, diminished trust, and impaired communication (Lieberman et al., 2002; Magee & Smith, 2013)—it is essential to promote social inclusion. Inclusion is a dynamic process that enables individuals and groups to participate fully in economic, social, and cultural life, thereby improving wellbeing and reducing inequality (Labklājības ministrija, 2020).

Promoting inclusion requires coordinated efforts across sectors. Strengthening inclusive education, fostering intergenerational collaboration, and implementing non-discriminatory policies rooted in social justice and human dignity are critical (Rawal, 2008; UNESCO, 2021). Inclusive education, in particular, plays a vital role in addressing historical injustices and building a more equitable future.

In sum, the findings of this study underscore the urgent need for holistic strategies to combat social exclusion. These must address both structural inequalities and interpersonal dynamics, ensuring that all individuals—regardless of background—have the opportunity to connect, participate, and thrive.

## **Conclusion**

This study highlights the complex and evolving nature of social exclusion, emphasizing the importance of assessing various psychological and contextual factors. Individual difficulties in adapting to change, modifying daily habits, and coping with mental or emotional health challenges play a significant role in shaping experiences of exclusion. In today's rapidly changing environment, additional factors—such as globalisation, technological advancement, shifts in the labour market, and evolving welfare policies—further contribute to the risk of exclusion across different social groups.

The consequences of social exclusion are multifaceted and vary depending on the individual's social context. It can negatively affect quality of life, not only for the excluded individual but also for their family members. Common outcomes include emotional detachment, impaired self-regulation, and difficulty accepting others, which may manifest in mental and physical health issues such as anxiety, depression, cardiovascular problems, memory loss, and reduced self-efficacy in educational and professional settings.

Importantly, social exclusion is not a fixed or irreversible condition. Individuals can change their social affiliations and relationships over time, depending on context and support. Therefore, it is essential to identify and address the underlying factors that perpetuate inequality and exclusion.

Promoting social inclusion is a vital strategy for mitigating social isolation. Inclusion is a dynamic and multifaceted process that requires both individual and collective efforts. It fosters full participation in economic, social, and cultural life, enhances wellbeing, and strengthens societal cohesion. The ethics of solidarity and the role of education—particularly inclusive education—are central to this process. Education serves as a common social resource that can empower individuals and promote equity.

In this study, respondents from all surveyed social groups reported experiences of social exclusion, underscoring its widespread relevance. While the concept was historically linked to social division, in the 21st century it is increasingly associated with environmental change, technological development, globalisation, and the transformation of work and welfare systems. Addressing social exclusion requires a comprehensive approach that integrates policy, education, and community engagement to build a more inclusive and resilient society.

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