

Chapter 4

The Well-Being of Young People in Europe During the Pandemic: The Social Ties, Labor Market Integration, and the Social Inequalities



Dragan Stanojević, Bojan Todosijević, and Anja Gvozdanović

4.1 Introduction

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, spanning from spring 2020 to spring 2023, European countries encountered significant social, economic, and political repercussions due to the implementation of policies designed to curb the spread of the virus and address its consequences. Physical distancing, social isolation, curfews, movement restrictions, limitations on public space interactions, institutional closures (especially educational institutions), transition to remote work, and employee layoffs, have served as policy instruments employed to varying extents across European nations for over 2 years. The adverse implications on the well-being of the youth have been well-documented, prompting an increasing discourse regarding the “COVID generation,” characterized by a significant deterioration in mental health, substantial disruptions in education, heightened vulnerability in the labor market, and hindrances to prospective career trajectories (UNICEF 2020).

Young people¹ were more frequently subject to job loss, cessation of job-seeking efforts, and encountered challenges in making ends meet (Palmer and Small 2021).

¹In the field of youth studies, conceptualizations of the youth through age range vary considerably, often delimited at 25, 30, or 35 years. For the purpose of our analysis, we propose categorizing youth as individuals aged 15–35 years. This broader spectrum pertains to distinct developmental stages, starting from puberty and concluding when physiological and emotional maturity is attained, often encompassing an extended duration (Furlong 2012).

D. Stanojević (✉)

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia

e-mail: dstanoje@f.bg.ac.rs

B. Todosijević

Institute of Social Sciences, Belgrade, Serbia

A. Gvozdanović

Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia

Pre-existing involvement in precarious employment structures, notably temporary and part-time contracts, rendered them more susceptible to challenges associated with financial instability and housing insecurity, both exacerbated during the pandemic. Countries have adopted diverse and often inadequately transparent and sustained approaches towards the pandemic, implementing, modifying, and retracting various policy measures. These actions have further heightened the sense of insecurity and distrust. Furthermore, imposing restrictions on gatherings and suspending a significant portion of political activities (including the prohibition of protests, collective actions, election postponements, etc.) has compounded the youth's perception of diminished connectedness and reduced readiness for collective action.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the trajectory of youth life satisfaction exhibited notable fluctuations, correlating with the imposition and alleviation of isolation measures. Despite the apparent rise in life satisfaction during the spring and summer of 2020, coinciding with the relaxation of restrictions, the enforcement of more rigorous measures in 2021 precipitated the nadir of youth life satisfaction (Eurofound 2021).

The subject of this chapter is the relationship between life satisfaction, as an indicator of the well-being of young individuals, and various forms of integration—social, economic, and political—during the pandemic. Common sense suggests that higher level of social integration often corresponds to increased access to resources, heightened resilience, and consequently, a greater level of life satisfaction. This assumption becomes particularly compelling when examining these relationships amid the COVID-19 crisis, which has resulted in social isolation and the atomization of individuals (Baarck et al. 2021). However, our pivotal research question that we aim to address is whether young people who are more effectively integrated are more satisfied or if certain forms of integration are associated with greater dissatisfaction and frustration. Alternatively, it is of interest to ascertain whether dissatisfaction might, in fact, foster a greater propensity to connect with others and engage in collective actions. This inquiry gives rise to several specific questions. In what manner have informal contacts, social interactions, and connections with others functioned as factors of resilience? Are different forms of political integration (participation) associated with life satisfaction? How is labor market integration related to life satisfaction, and in what manner, if at all? Do societies characterized by greater equality and solidarity contribute to a more positive self-perception among young individuals?

We will first focus on the theoretical background of the relationship between life satisfaction and the three dimensions of integration: social ties, participation in the labor market, and political participation. Namely, we will discuss the findings of current research regarding the link between life satisfaction of youth and social integration (including informal contacts and experiences of discrimination), labor market integration and political participation in Europe. Following this, in the methodological section, we will delineate the indicators used and the methodology applied. In the subsequent section, we will present the analyses, and in the discussion, we will endeavor to connect the findings with theoretical frameworks and contextual characteristics.

4.2 Theoretical Background

4.2.1 Social Integration

Primary Social Ties and Social Capital In this study, we examine the role of horizontal social ties, primarily friendships and familial connections. Social capital, consisting of trust-based connections, represents both a societal and individual resource in everyday life. This is especially true for strong ties (Granovetter 1973), characterized not only by reciprocity, trust, and shared norms but also by emotional intensity and frequent contact. Friendships, classified as bonding social capital by Putnam (2000), provide young people with a sense of security and belonging, generating practical knowledge and skills related to the challenges of growing up and facing life's inevitable limitations (Boeck 2007). Close friendships also offer social support during times of crisis and stress, addressing current material, emotional, and other needs (Amichai-Hamburger et al. 2013). Active friendships and networks, or awareness of their "safety-net" function, contribute to life satisfaction and subjective well-being, regardless of age (Crocetti and Meeus 2014; Delhey and Dragolov 2016).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, public health policies in most European Union countries focused on reducing the number of COVID-19 cases and minimizing the risk of virus spread. This involved some form of lockdown and restrictions on movement, discouraging social interactions. Such circumstances posed a significant challenge, necessitating adaptation to a crisis with an uncertain endpoint. During the pandemic, two notable phenomena among young people were detected: the increase in feelings of social isolation (Baarck et al. 2021) and the shift of social interactions, especially during school closures, towards the virtual realm facilitated by digital technologies (Drouin et al. 2020; Fernandes et al. 2020). At the same time, both social isolation and intensified online communication are not mutually exclusive but can be complementary.

Social isolation refers to an inadequate or insufficient number and poor quality of interactions with others, influenced by various individual and social factors (Clair et al. 2021). During the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, a significant proportion of individuals in the European Union experienced frequent feelings of loneliness, more than doubling the rate found in a comparable survey from pre-pandemic 2016. Notably, the impact of isolation and lockdown measures was particularly pronounced among the youth. In the period from April to July 2020, young people experienced a surge in loneliness to four times the rate reported 4 years earlier (Baarck et al. 2021).

Recent psychological studies indicate a correlation between higher levels of social isolation and lower levels of life satisfaction and subjective well-being (Birditt et al. 2021; Clair et al. 2021). Conversely, a sense of belonging and social support associated with intense social interactions is positively correlated with higher well-being and life satisfaction across all age cohorts (Ahmadiani et al. 2022; Ciziceno

2022; Crowley and Walsh 2018, 2021; Helliwell 2006; Onal et al. 2022; Putnam 2000; Sarmiento Prieto et al. 2023). Therefore, the widespread feeling of social isolation is likely to impact the level of well-being or life satisfaction among young people. Given the growing prevalence of the “online life” of young people, it raises the question of whether the importance of online social interactions for well-being and life satisfaction is equivalent to that in the real world. Happiness and feelings of loneliness among young people during the COVID-19 pandemic were not correlated with the intensity of their virtual interactions (Towner et al. 2022). If we extrapolate this finding to the relationship between social capital and life satisfaction, we can cautiously conclude that their connection is effectively built when relationships of trust and reciprocity are established and maintained through regular face-to-face contact.

Hypothesis 1: Young people with higher levels of bonding social capital express significantly higher levels of life satisfaction.

Ethnic Discrimination Research dedicated to the pandemic period and social inequalities almost unanimously concludes that the pandemic has exacerbated and underscored existing gender, racial, economic, and ethnic inequalities. In addition, ethnic minorities across European countries generally reported lower life satisfaction than members of the ethnic majority even before the pandemic (Kööts-Ausmees and Realo 2016). Therefore, minority groups, already facing an unfavorable social position, experienced even greater challenges during the pandemic, with significant differences in access to healthcare, employment, housing solutions, and income (Gould and Wilson 2020). A global review and meta-analysis of ethnic inequalities during the pandemic confirmed that the disparities in health outcomes were primarily due to varying levels of risks, with institutional racism and racial discrimination recognized as underlying causes (Irizar et al. 2023). The health and economic burden of the crisis were unevenly distributed across social categories in most Western societies (Ahmed et al. 2023; Fouskas et al. 2022; Irizar et al. 2023; Katikireddi et al. 2021; Platt 2021). For instance, data on COVID-19 mortality in the UK showed that nearly all ethnic minority groups faced greater mortality risks compared to the White British majority within the same age cohort (Platt and Warwick 2020). Given this context, it is expected that groups more exposed to various stressors related to life security during the pandemic are at a greater risk of compromised mental health and, consequently, reduced life satisfaction (Lenoir and Wong 2023).

The crisis, uncertainty, and unpredictable daily life create fertile ground for the rise of xenophobia, racism, and nationalism in the public and political spheres. In times of crisis, widespread feelings of insecurity, personal threat, and social instability contribute to an increase in authoritarian tendencies, known as the authoritarian reflex (Inglehart 2018). Some citizens develop a tendency to rally around authoritative figures, displaying a strong sense of unity and conformity within their group, strict adherence to the group’s standards, and a dismissal of those not part of the group (Inglehart 2018). Elias et al. (2021) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is linked to racism and xenophobia in two fundamental ways. First, there is an increase

in racist sentiment towards minority groups during periods of widespread existential threat. In the past, ethnic or racial minorities were often targeted with dehumanizing narratives by the majority, blaming them for various societal misfortunes (Elias et al. 2021), and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. The second way in which the pandemic and racism are connected is the social moment in the Western world when the pandemic began, characterized by the rise in exclusive nationalism that then intensified xenophobic racism. With an ongoing anti-migrant narrative in the political life of some European societies, the pandemic era further complicated the integration process for immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees (Fouskas et al. 2022). Additionally, individuals of Asian descent experienced anti-Asian discrimination (Litam and Oh 2021; Wang et al. 2021), contributing to the mental health deterioration of this ethnic group. For example, experiences of COVID-19-related racial discrimination among American Chinese were identified as a strong predictor of depression (Litam and Oh 2021). In Canada, individuals born in the country expressed significantly higher levels of life satisfaction than Asian immigrants before the pandemic (Helliwell et al. 2020). Regarding the mental health of young people, a German study found that the state of mental health before and during the early stages of the pandemic remained relatively consistent among ethnic Germans and various minority groups. However, the stress associated with the pandemic posed threats to the mental health of young people, particularly due to increased experiences of discrimination and health concerns among Asian minorities and health concerns within Turkish, Middle Eastern, and African minority communities (Plenty et al. 2021).

Hypothesis 2: Young people who belong to an ethnic minority express significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than those who belong to an ethnic majority.

4.2.2 Labor Market Integration

Employment constitutes a significant aspect of the transition to adulthood, serving as a crucial prerequisite for financial autonomy (Arnett 2014; Furlong et al. 2017). The work transitions of young people in European countries commonly start with a series of temporary and insecure jobs, and those with lower educational backgrounds often experience extended periods of unemployment. Consequently, their life trajectories are exposed to various risks and uncertainties (Beck 1992; Furlong and Cartmel 1997). Furlong et al. (2017, 18) characterize this position as liminal, as it does not enable young individuals to become “fully adult.” In a society marked by job insecurity, planning becomes challenging, constraining the agency of young people and leading to discomfort and anxiety (Chesters and Cuervo 2019). Therefore, the relationship between labor market integration and the well-being of young individuals exhibits robust associations.

When employed and adequately rewarded for their efforts, young individuals express higher satisfaction levels than those who are unemployed and inactive.

Moreover, those engaged in more secure employment with permanent contracts report greater satisfaction than their counterparts involved in temporary and less stable contractual arrangements (Vancea and Utzet 2017). Furthermore, young individuals classified as Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) report lower life satisfaction compared to their peers who are employed or undergoing education (Jongbloed and Giret 2022).

While these associations are generally present, the mechanism through which one's position in the labor market leads to (dis)satisfaction is complex and contextually conditioned.² Employed individuals generate income, affording them a level of control to manage their lives and the ability to organize their future, making improvements in various life domains such as housing, relationships, and family (Furlong et al. 2017). Although income is commonly recognized as the primary reason for increased life satisfaction, a job can also serve as the foundation for identity (Ezzy 1993), self-esteem, a sense of purpose, but also a way to structure daily activities, to generate social capital, and more (Jahoda 1981; Voßemer and Eunicke 2015).

Getting and losing a job can have varying effects on life satisfaction depending on the situation and the significance individuals attribute to these events. As Frey and Stutzer (2002, 101) point out "individuals tend to evaluate their own situation relative to other persons. For most persons, unemployment lowers their happiness less if they are not alone with this particular fate. When unemployment is seen to hit many persons, one knows or hears of, both the psychic and the social effects are mitigated." Furthermore, the flexibility of contracts and working hours may be desirable in some instances and imposed options in others, contingent upon the social context and the individual's circumstances. For example, during academic studies, temporary employment may be preferable as it allows flexibility, but a similar arrangement may be challenging for a young parent responsible for bills and child-rearing. Flexible work arrangements, such as remote work, ordinarily provide greater autonomy and control over the work process and the potential for better work-life balance (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). Data during the COVID-19 crisis indicate that such arrangements presented new challenges as boundaries between private and work life were disrupted, especially when most household members were intensely present within the household. Nevertheless, remote work remained associated with higher satisfaction compared to in-office work (Kondratowicz et al. 2022; Susilo 2020).

Analyses of the labor market situation during the COVID-19 crisis reveal that young individuals were particularly vulnerable to risks, given that, even before the pandemic, this age group had the highest proportion engaged in non-standard and precarious employment (MacDonald 2017). Temporary jobs are the first to be affected in times of crisis, leading young people in such positions to be among the

²In the literature, various theoretical frameworks are used to explain this relationship. These include functionalist and deprivation approach (Jahoda 1981), vitamin model (Warr 1987), agency theory (Fryer 1986), and sociological approach via identity theory (Ezzy 1993), all of which serve as foundational concepts that are subsequently critiqued and developed further. Voßemer and Eunicke (2015) provide an extensive overview of the literature and research on the relationship between employment and the well-being of young people.

first to lose their jobs, consequently elevating the unemployment rate. At the EU level, within just 1 year of the crisis's inception, youth employment dropped 2.8 percentage points (European Union 2022). Prior to the onset of the pandemic, youth in European countries were disproportionately employed in sectors particularly vulnerable to the crisis, namely accommodation and food services, wholesale and retail, and health and social work.

From August 2019 to August 2020, the share of unemployed individuals in the EU increased from 15 to 18.5%. The NEET category increased by approximately 1.5 percentage points between 2019 and 2020 (Konle-Seidl and Picarella 2021). These data only partially reveal the depth of the problem, as a significant number of young individuals (an additional 2.4 percentage points) lost their jobs, became temporarily inactive, or ceased their job search, leading to a substantial rise in the inactivity rates among the youth (Anderton et al. 2020; Konle-Seidl and Picarella 2021). The situation in non-EU European countries was similar, with minor variations.

Hypothesis 3: Young people who are employed are more satisfied compared to those who are unemployed.

Hypothesis 4: Young people who work from home are more satisfied compared to those who worked in offices during the COVID-19 crisis

4.2.3 Political Participation and Life Satisfaction

Political integration is an essential aspect of general social integration, especially for the young people in democracies as they are entering adulthood and the world of political rights and duties. Political integration is a complex phenomenon that could be expressed in various ways. Arguably, political *participation* is among its most direct indicators. Taking part in political activities such as voting in elections, contacting politicians, joining a political party, or participating in demonstrations are signs of being integrated into the political domain of the social world.

Political participation³ is an obvious candidate variable for helping understand youth well-being in society. The COVID-19 era is perhaps a particularly relevant context, as it was a period of increased politicization in many countries (e.g., Rothgerber et al. 2020). However, it is not immediately and intuitively clear why political participation should be associated with life satisfaction. Political activity is rarely accompanied by immediate reward (utility in economists' terminology) but is often accompanied by frustration. Pacheco and Lange (2010, 688), therefore, rhetorically ask: "Given political participation as a seemingly futile activity to realize individual preferences, why would we expect a positive relationship between

³According to Verba and Nie (1972, 9), "Political participation is the means by which the interests, desires and demands of the ordinary citizen are communicated (...) all those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or decisions they make."

participation and enhanced utility?” Indeed, while political participation is a rather popular research topic, the relationship with life satisfaction only recently gained momentum, while research focused on youth political participation is still relatively rare (cf., Weiss 2020).

Participating in politics is, in fact, found to be associated with the feeling of well-being in different countries in various ways (e.g., Dorn et al. 2008; Frey and Stutzer 2000b; He et al. 2022; Laurence 2021; Lindholm 2020; Owen et al. 2008; Pacheco and Lange 2010; Vega-Tinoco et al. 2022). The involved mechanism may be based on the feeling of accomplishment, a sense of efficacy, self-appreciation for taking part in an activity aimed to contribute to the welfare of the society (“procedural utility,” Frey and Stutzer 2000b), and so on. Laurence (2021, 322), for instance, concludes “that participation’s impact needs to be understood through both social- and psychological-resource models, with positive indirect effects observed via structural/cognitive elements of social capital as well as perceived control/social efficacy.”

At the same time, researchers argued that it is the experience of well-being that affects political participation (e.g., Barnes et al. 1979; Flavin and Keane 2012; Lindholm 2020; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2011). For instance, Weitz-Shapiro and Winters (2011, 118) conclude that “our data are more consistent with the claim that happiness causes people to participate.” The causality is explained by interpreting subjective well-being as a “psychological resource for the purpose of political participation due to its positive influence on self-efficacy and motivation to invest time and effort into political activities” (Lindholm 2020, 472). Also, the influence may be exerted through identification with the socio-political system and broader social integration. In line with these ambiguities, Lorenzini (2015, 383) observed that “Several researchers have used subjective well-being to explain political participation [...]. Others have analysed it as resulting from political institutions and participation,” however, he prefers the “satisfaction influences participation” causal direction rather than vice versa.

Not only could causal direction go both ways, but the direction of association has also been found to be positive, negative, and non-existent. For instance, feelings of not-well-being may be a strong motive for political participation as a generator of the desire to change (something in) society. Indeed, it was reported that life *dissatisfaction* may foster youth propensity for political protest (e.g., Barnes et al. 1979; Lorenzini 2015; Marsh 1977). Conversely, Flavin and Keane (2012) concluded that life satisfaction does not contribute to protest activities. To make matters more complex and difficult for a simple résumé, Lorenzini (2015, 382–3) found an interesting interaction of political participation with unemployment in Switzerland, concluding that life satisfaction (LS) “fosters unemployed youth protest activities. In addition, [...] LS hinders employed youth contacting activities.”

One reason contributing to the diversity of research findings is the complexity of the phenomenon of political participation. It has been noted long ago that political participation is not a simple and unitary phenomenon easy to define (e.g., Barnes et al. 1979; Fox 2014; Sabucedo and Arce 1991; Van Deth 2014; Weiss 2020). To

better understand it and derive more useful research hypotheses, separating various forms or modes of political participation proved helpful. Lindholm (2020), for instance, differentiates formal and protest-oriented political participation. Similar, and perhaps the best known, is the division between conventional and unconventional modes of participation (Barnes et al. 1979).

Conventional modes of political participation are those that are, so to say, prescribed by the actual political system and widely regarded as common and legitimate modes of participation. Examples are voting at elections, political party activism, or writing letters to representatives. Given the system-supporting and institutionalized nature of the conventional political participation, it is unsurprising that a positive association with well-being is often found with indicators of this form of political participation (e.g., Flavin and Keane 2012). *Unconventional* modes of political participation would be those that are less commonly practiced and often not explicitly codified (non-institutionalized) or even allowed by the political system (Pitti 2018). Here, the examples would be online engagement, participation in demonstrations and protests, signing petitions, boycotting products, and similar.

This distinction seems particularly useful for the study of association with life satisfaction. Conventional participation might be seen as stemming more from the perceived legitimacy of the system, trust in the rules of the democratic process, and so on. With the sense of performing the duty of basic political participation (e.g., voting), this would lead to an enhanced feeling of well-being. Yet, another dynamic is also conceivable. For instance, high political polarization, i.e., strong negative attitudes towards political opponents, may stimulate both conventional participation and decrease feelings of well-being.

The unconventional forms of participation often reflect a negative attitude concerning some issues that are strong enough to motivate one for some unconventional activities. This is relevant since those activities are often seen as resource-demanding (in terms of time, money, and risks). Hence, these political participation forms seem likely to be associated with lower life satisfaction. In fact, such findings (e.g., negative association of life satisfaction with protest activity) have been reported in the literature (e.g., Barnes et al. 1979; Lorenzini 2015; Marsh 1977), although not universally (e.g., Flavin and Keane 2012). This is not necessarily surprising. Unconventional activism, such as pro-government demonstrations, can also be system-supportive and, therefore, positively or not associated with life satisfaction.

While we follow the literature in separating the two outlined forms of political participation, we treat voting at elections as a separate entity, the third form of political participation. While it is perhaps the most conventional of all forms, it is also unique. It is the most widespread form of participation in democracies—every citizen has the right to participate in elections, and many do. In fact, in some countries, voting in national elections is compulsory. All other forms of conventional participation (those represented in our data, at least) are far less often practiced. Hence, the motivation behind voting and other forms of conventional participation might differ. Voting is a more explicit and direct expression of the system's acceptance, so we expect it to be most positively associated with life satisfaction. While this could

apply to the general population, it seems to be especially relevant for the youth because it appears that those more conventional ones are more likely to take part in voting earlier (youth initially shows lower levels of participation, which then increases with age, cf. Quintelier 2007).⁴

It is time to turn to the issue of what should be expected to be specific for youth political participation under the extraordinary conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unsurprisingly, the expectations are not clear because the individual ESS (European Social Survey) studies analyzed here were not conducted simultaneously, which means they were conducted during different phases of the pandemic. Also, different countries implemented different policies (e.g., restrictions on free movement), making deriving specific predictions unfeasible. Still, in general terms, participation might have been increasingly motivated by negative feelings, i.e., general dissatisfaction, given that governments were often blamed for not performing well in that context. Higher life satisfaction/well-being under such conditions could be accompanied by a more passive political outlook, especially because avoiding unnecessary social contacts would also mean avoiding some forms of political activism. So, overall, we would expect life satisfaction to be *negatively* associated with unconventional political participation and positively with conventional political participation, especially voting. The voting variable is specific in several regards. The ESS (European Social Survey) question asks about voting at “the last election,” which in some cases means before the pandemic, and in others during a pandemic phase with fewer restrictions. In both cases, we may expect the association to be more akin to the usual findings of the positive association of voting with life satisfaction.

The derived expectations do not seem particularly specific for young people, partly because the background literature reports general findings, not specifically for age categories.⁵ Research on youth political attitudes and behavior outlined certain specificities, well summarized by Quintelier (2007, 165), who concluded that “young people are less concerned with politics, less politically knowledgeable, do not participate in social or political activities, are more apathetic, and have low levels of political interest.” However, these findings mainly deal with the level of certain variables but not so much with the relationships between variables, which is the concern of the present paper.

⁴For example, while the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a decrease in overall electoral participation, this decline was particularly notable among young people (Fieldhouse et al. 2007). Conversely, some scholars argue that over the past few decades, voter turnout has remained steady and relatively high among young people in Europe (Pilkington and Pollock 2015).

⁵For a recent literature review on youth political participation, see Weiss (2020). In her words, “In conclusion, it can be said that the definition of youth political participation is currently nothing more than general political participation.” (Weiss 2020, 9). The main difference is in the level of political engagement, and in different conception of the “political” among the younger generations. No generalizations seem to have been made about different relationships between political participation and other major variables in this context, including life satisfaction.

Hypotheses 5, 6, 7: life satisfaction is positively associated with (5) voting and (6) conventional participation, and (7) negatively with unconventional political participation.

4.3 Contextual Variations

In comparative research, it is important to consider the potential role of contextual variables, whether as background variables to control for the role of some cross-country differences or as variables that have direct and interactive effects. In this paper, we focus on two contextual variables dealing with inequalities between and within countries: GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita and the GINI inequality coefficient.

The relationship between *income inequality* (GINI) and life satisfaction is not unequivocal. National and cross-country research shows mixed effects, indicating a positive (Cheung 2018; Berg and Veenhoven 2010), or a negative (Alesina et al. 2004; Graafland and Lous 2018; Schröder 2016; Verme 2011) association between. These discrepancies result from various methodological approaches, employed variables, statistical techniques, and contextual specificities (Verme 2011). In the sociology, the most prominent theory that explains the relationship between inequality and satisfaction is the theory of *relative deprivation* (Runciman 1966). This approach highlights the significance of reference groups with whom individuals compare themselves and the importance of the perception of the fairness of distribution, suggesting that higher levels of inequality lead to lower life satisfaction. The perception of inequality and actual social disparities often lead to dissatisfaction, but also societies marked by inequality tend to experience related issues such as social isolation, poverty, crime, and socio-political instability, which further influence overall satisfaction levels. Comparative analyses of European societies generally indicate a *negative* association between life satisfaction and income inequalities (Alesina et al. 2004; Hajdu and Hajdu 2014). Europeans generally exhibit lower life satisfaction in countries characterized by significant income disparities. Research specifically focusing on young individuals in this regard is lacking, and our assumption is that greater income inequalities among European countries will lead to lower life satisfaction among the youth.

GDP Per Capita Although the debate on the manner and extent of the relationship between wealth and satisfaction is ongoing, the majority of studies investigating cross-country differences indicate a positive association between GDP per capita and life satisfaction. Research in Europe also demonstrates clear connections between these two variables (Degutis et al. 2010), and Pittau et al. (2010, 358) provide explanations for the content of this relationship “in Europe GDP per capita is highly correlated with levels and quality of basic facilities and services, such as transportation and communications systems, and with levels and quality of public institutions like schools and hospitals, as well as with low levels of crime and corruption,” leading to a higher degree of comfort, predictability, and consequently, satisfaction.

4.4 Method

4.4.1 Data

To examine the relationship between life satisfaction, different forms of social integration, and characteristics of the social context, we used data from the tenth cycle of the European Social Survey⁶ (ESS10-2023), conducted across 31 countries during the years 2020–2022. The ESS data collection was performed during the COVID-19 crisis and was marked by several disruptions due to national-level health measures that prevented in-person interviews. Sub-populations comprising individuals aged 15–35 years were extracted for this analysis.⁷ The ESS instrument encompasses a set of indicators that measure social, economic, and political integration. We used two standard indicators of contextual variations—GINI and GDP per capita. For the GDP per capita (expressed in current US dollars) data, we used the World Data Bank database (World Bank 2022). The source for the GINI coefficient was the EUROSTAT database (Eurostat 2021).

4.4.2 Research Design and Analytical Methods

Dependent Variable

Outcome variable—*life satisfaction* was assessed using the following question: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?” Responses were recorded on an 11-point scale, where a rating of 0 indicates extreme dissatisfaction, and a rating of 10 represents extreme satisfaction.

Independent Variables

Social Integration. To better understand the role of social integration in shaping well-being, we employed two indicators: the frequency of social contacts and the experience of ethnic discrimination. For the first indicator, “Frequency of Social Contacts,” posed a fundamental question: “How often do you socially meet with friends, relatives, or colleagues?” Respondents were given a scale of 1 to 7, from “Never” to “Every day,” allowing us to capture the regularity of social interactions. The second indicator delved into the experience of ethnic discrimination as a pertinent factor that can influence an individual’s sense of belonging and overall well-being.

⁶European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure (ESS ERIC). (2023). ESS10 integrated file, edition 3.2 [Data set]. Sikt—Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. https://doi.org/10.21338/ess10e03_2.

⁷While this data, when isolated, is not representative for the youth population on a per-country basis, it nevertheless provides adequate information to explore associations between the variables of interest.

Political Participation. Political integration is an important aspect of general social integration, especially for young people in democracies. We treat political integration as commensurable to political participation. Our investigation was guided by three distinct indicators: conventional participation, unconventional participation, and voting. Conventional participation encompassed activities such as wearing campaign badges, contacting politicians, and active involvement in political parties or action groups. Voting was measured by whether respondents participated in the most recent election. Unconventional participation included diverse activities, from online engagement to participation in demonstrations, signing petitions, engagement with civic organizations, and making purchase decisions for political reasons. These are fairly standard measures used to operationalize political participation.

Labor Market Integration. This facet was assessed through three indicators: employment status, work location (office or home), and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market. Employment status classified individuals into either employed or unemployed/inactive categories. Work location is considered the place of work, distinguishing between office-based and remote work, which took on a new dimension of relevance during the pandemic. Additionally, the study investigated the “Force Majeure” indicator, which assessed whether respondents experienced various labor market disruptions since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, including job losses, reductions in income, decreased working hours, furloughs, and forced unpaid leave or holiday.

Social Context Indicators. We examined social context variables that capture the disparities between countries, shedding light on the economic and income inequalities that can significantly influence well-being. Two primary indicators were used to assess these inequalities: GDP per capita and the GINI coefficient. GDP per capita provides insights into the average income or wealth possessed by the population in a given nation and serves as a measure of wealth differences between countries. The GINI coefficient measures the distribution of income among a population, with a higher GINI coefficient indicating greater income inequality.

Control Variables. To ensure the robustness of our analysis, we also incorporated several control variables, including gender, age, education level, urban or rural residence, and marital or union status.

We employed a random intercept multilevel linear regression analysis as our analytical method, encompassing a sample of 31 countries. MLM (multilevel modelling) offers the capacity to discern the effects of individual characteristics of young respondents as well as the social context within which they reside. In this manner, it becomes possible to ascertain the extent to which personal attributes, social context, and their interactions impact the level of life satisfaction. We present two tables, each featuring ten models. To weight the data, we used the weights that take into account the survey’s design, population characteristics, and the relative numerical relationship between countries (*anweight*).

4.5 Results

The initial model presented in Table 4.1 is a random variance component model without independent variables. In the first model, all independent predictors at Level I are included. The second model introduces an additional contextual variable (the GINI coefficient and GDP per capita, respectively) as the indicators at Level II. In all subsequent models, interactions between the indicators at Level II and the Level I analysis are incorporated.

Social Ties Young people who have a greater number of friends and contacts with whom they socialize more frequently tend to experience higher levels of life satisfaction. All models consistently demonstrate this positive association, thus affirming the significance of social connections for the well-being of young people. Those who reported experiencing ethnic discrimination exhibit a lower level of satisfaction compared to their counterparts without that experience.

Labor Market Young individuals who are employed tend to experience higher levels of satisfaction compared to those who are unemployed or inactive. Unemployment among young people during COVID-19 signifies the absence of income and the ability to plan and manage their lives in times of crisis. Additionally, being absent from the labor market in a context of already reduced social interactions has further confined young individuals to narrow social relationships, making their lives even more isolated. Those who have encountered some issues in their workplace during the COVID-19 crisis report lower levels of satisfaction compared to their peers with stable working arrangements. The reduction in earnings, job loss, or the experience of being furloughed has introduced additional layers of uncertainty and insecurity into the transitional life paths of young individuals through the labor market. Each incremental rise in risk has correspondingly led to diminished satisfaction among the youth, underscoring the significance of stability and certainty as pivotal sources of contentment. The finding that young individuals who worked in an office reported lower levels of satisfaction compared to those who predominantly worked from home is interesting. It appears that better work-life balance, as well as privacy and security during the crisis period, were more significant sources of satisfaction than every day in-person interactions with colleagues.

Political Participation All three measures of political participation are significantly associated with life satisfaction. The associations are virtually unaffected by adding the macro-level variables, thus making the results in the two tables practically indistinguishable. Both conventional and unconventional modes of political participation are *negatively* associated with life satisfaction. This means that higher levels of both modalities of political participation/integration are accompanied by, on average, *lower* levels of life satisfaction. The results for voting at elections are different, however: the coefficient is positive in this case. This means that, on average, voting at elections is accompanied by a relatively higher life satisfaction.

Table 4.1 MLM—Life satisfaction, young people aged 15–35, Europe, ESS round 10 (2020–2021)

Predictors	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
(Intercept)	0.00	0.00	-0.02	0.02	0.05	0.00	0.02	-0.01	0.02
Female		-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	-0.03	-0.02
Age		-0.01**	-0.01**	-0.01**	-0.01**	-0.01**	-0.01**	-0.01**	-0.01**
Higher ed.		0.12***	0.12***	0.12***	0.12***	0.12***	0.12***	0.12***	0.12***
In education		0.10***	0.09***	0.09***	0.09***	0.09***	0.09***	0.09**	0.09***
Urban		-0.01	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02
Married/in partnership		0.34***	0.34***	0.34***	0.34***	0.34***	0.34***	0.34***	0.34***
How often socially meet with friends ...		0.18***	0.19***	0.17***	0.18***	0.18***	0.18***	0.18***	0.18***
Conventional		-0.11***	-0.10***	-0.10***	-0.10***	-0.10***	-0.10***	-0.10***	-0.10***
Vote		0.17***	0.16***	0.16***	0.11*	0.17***	0.17***	0.16***	0.16***
Unconventional		-0.10***	-0.10***	-0.10***	-0.10***	-0.08**	-0.11***	-0.10***	-0.10***
Employed		0.28***	0.29***	0.28***	0.29***	0.29***	0.28***	0.24***	0.28***
At office		-0.13***	-0.13***	-0.13***	-0.13**	-0.13***	-0.09**	-0.13***	-0.13***
Force Majeure		-0.03**	-0.03**	-0.03**	-0.03**	-0.03**	-0.03**	-0.03**	-0.03**
Discrimination (ethnic)		-0.25***	-0.25***	-0.26***	-0.25***	-0.25***	-0.25***	-0.24***	-0.25**
Gini			-0.09*	-0.09*	-0.12	-0.09*	-0.10*	-0.08	-0.09*
Gini x How often socially meet				0.04**					
Gini x Vote					0.04				
Gini x Unconventional						-0.01			
Gini x At office							-0.07		
Gini x Employed								0.06	
Gini x Discrimination (ethnic)									-0.14

(continued)

Table 4.1 (continued)

Predictors	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
<i>Random effects</i>									
σ^2	0.78	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65
τ_{00}	0.08 _{country}	0.07 _{country}	0.06 _{country}	0.06 _{country}	0.11 _{country}	0.06 _{country}	0.07 _{country}	0.06 _{country}	0.06 _{country}
τ_{11}			0.00 _{country}	0.00 _{country}	0.03 _{country}	0.01 _{country}	0.01 _{country}	0.03 _{country}	0.11 _{country}
ρ_{01}			*socially meet	*socially meet	*vote	*unconventional	*at office	*employed	*discrimination
ICC	0.10	0.10	0.09	-0.66 _{country}	-0.79 _{country}	0.10 _{country}	-0.81 _{country}	0.07 _{country}	0.26 _{country}
N - country	31	31	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
Observations	14,435	11,079	11,079	11,079	11,079	11,079	11,079	11,079	11,079

* < 0.5, ** < 0.01, *** < 0.001

Contextual Variables When it comes to differences between social contexts or countries, the results are as follows. Firstly, the impact of contextual variables is not very high, and they only marginally improve the models (the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) decreases slightly). However, income inequality, expressed through the GINI coefficient, exhibits negative associations with the level of satisfaction among young individuals. If they reside in a country with pronounced income inequalities, on average, they will be less satisfied compared to young people living in societies with lower levels of inequality (Ahn et al. 2016). The results of interactions between GINI and social contacts are intriguing. As income inequality increases, the significance of social contacts becomes greater for satisfaction. If young individuals live in a country with pronounced income inequalities, having more contacts will lead to higher satisfaction compared to young people in countries with lower levels of inequality. This is an interesting finding because it suggests that personal informal networks compensate for structural inequalities.

In Table 4.2, the first two models are identical to the previous ones. In the third model, an indicator of GDP per capita is introduced, showing positive associations with life satisfaction. As society becomes wealthier, young individuals are, on average, more satisfied with their lives. Neither social contacts nor labor market integration are statistically significantly associated with GDP per capita. This implies that the effects of labor market integration, political integration, and the level of social interactions do not exhibit interactive impacts with the aggregate wealth on life satisfaction. Irrespective of a nation's economic wealth, political participation, labor market integration, and the level of social interactions have similar effects on life satisfaction.

However, there is a positive interaction between GDP per capita, discrimination, and satisfaction. Young individuals who report experiencing ethnic discrimination have a higher level of satisfaction if they live in wealthier countries compared to young people who have experienced the same discrimination in countries with lower GDP per capita.

<i>Random effects</i>												
σ^2	0.78	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65	0.65
τ_{00}	0.07 _{country}	0.06 _{country}	0.06 _{country}	0.06 _{country}	0.11 _{country}	0.06 _{country}	0.07 _{country}	0.06 _{country}	0.07 _{country}	0.06 _{country}	0.06 _{country}	0.06 _{country}
τ_{11}				0.01 _{country} ; ^{socially} meet	0.02 _{country} ; ^{voice}	0.01 _{country} ; ^{unconventional}	0.02 _{country} ; ^{at office}	0.01 _{country} ; ^{unconventional}	0.02 _{country} ; ^{employed}	0.04 _{country} ; ^{employed}	0.04 _{country} ; ^{discrimination}	0.04 _{country} ; ^{discrimination}
ρ_{01}				-0.74 _{country}	-0.81 _{country}	-0.12 _{country}	-0.84 _{country}	-0.12 _{country}	0.17 _{country}	0.17 _{country}	-0.03 _{country}	-0.03 _{country}
ICC	0.10	0.08	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09	0.09
N - country	31	31	31	31	31	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
Observations	14,435	11,079	11,079	11,079	11,079	11,079	11,079	11,079	11,079	11,079	11,079	11,079

*<0.5, **<0.01, ***<0.001

4.6 Discussion

This analysis confirms the positive associations between social capital and the life satisfaction among young people during the pandemic, aligning with a series of other similar studies (Ahmadiani et al. 2022; Ciziceno 2022; Crowley and Walsh 2018, 2021; Helliwell 2006; Onal et al. 2022; Putnam 2000; Sarmiento Prieto et al. 2023). It means that the sense of belonging, trust, reciprocity, and security arising from strong connections, or bonding social capital, is an important predictor of life satisfaction. Moreover, it is shown that in uncertain and unstable times, social capital is precisely one of the crucial resources for young people to build their own resilience, reflected in a higher degree of life satisfaction. This understanding is particularly important in the context of the increasingly prevalent sense of social isolation or the weakening of quality interpersonal relationships in real life. Simultaneously, due to epidemiological reasons, many activities have shifted to digital platforms, and contacts have largely been reduced to digitally mediated relationships. Despite the intensification of online connections, judging by our results and those of other studies (Towner et al. 2022), it can be assumed that the virtual world has not adequately replaced or substituted for face-to-face relationships and the personal benefits they bring. This analysis has also shown that such contacts have the potential to create quality relationships and, consequently, emotional and other resources that lead to life satisfaction.

Belonging to an ethnic minority is a significant predictor of reduced life satisfaction. The social position of ethnic minorities in European societies, even in the pre-pandemic era, was, on average, less favorable, and their life satisfaction was lower compared to the ethnic majority. The combination of an average unfavorable position in social structure and smoldering xenophobia and nationalism constituted the social context in which members of ethnic and racial minorities faced the pandemic, which, according to some studies, further exacerbated existing social inequalities and made them more visible (Ahmadiani et al. 2022; Ciziceno 2022; Onal et al. 2022; Sarmiento Prieto et al. 2023). We can assume that all of this contributed to lower level of life satisfaction among young members of ethnic minorities.

These results indicate that for life satisfaction, affiliation with a close circle of people with whom a young person can establish a quality relationship is important. Additionally, a higher degree of inclusiveness in society towards minority cultural identities also contributes to higher life satisfaction.

Labor market integration emerges as a highly significant determinant of life satisfaction. Young individuals who are employed and have not experienced disruptions in the labor market during the crisis exhibit greater satisfaction compared to those who are unemployed and have faced job loss and/or income reduction. Part of this (dis)satisfaction may stem from the sense of security provided by employment and income, while another aspect is derived from a sense of belonging and the ability to maintain social connections with colleagues. During the crisis, remote work

proved to be a more significant source of satisfaction for the youth than in-office work. In addition to the classic reasons such as reduced commute times, fewer workplace distractions, a more comfortable work environment, lower health risks, fewer social conflicts, and a safer social environment should be added.

The reported results confirm our expectations that the three indicators of political participation are associated with life satisfaction. The fact that the associations are virtually unaffected by adding the macro-level variables supports the solidity of the determined relationships. However, the hypotheses about the *direction* of the associations are not entirely confirmed, making the findings particularly interesting. The results concerning voting are in line with Hypothesis 5 and with the bulk of the literature: Young European voters tend to express higher levels of life satisfaction, on average, compared to the abstainers.

However, although voting is perhaps the most conventional political behavior (next to voter abstinence), other forms of political activities that we categorized as conventional are negatively associated with life satisfaction. Those youngsters who engage in activities such as wearing a campaign badge, contacting a politician, or being active in a political party or action group tend to be somewhat *dissatisfied*. This is contrary to our Hypothesis 6 and to numerous findings reported in the literature (e.g., Frey and Stutzer 2000a, b; He et al. 2022; Laurence 2021; Owen et al. 2008; Pacheco and Lange 2010; Vega-Tinoco et al. 2022; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2011). Unlike Vega-Tinoco et al. (2022), who also used ESS data, for instance, we found that it is voting that is positively associated, while the other forms of (civic in their terminology) participation are *negatively* associated with life satisfaction. Perhaps this reflects the generation differences—they dealt with older adults (aged 50+), while our study is focused on the youth, and we use a newer wave of the ESS data (ESS10 from 2020 to 2021). Plus, our data were collected during the COVID-19 era.

Tentatively expected is the negative association between life satisfaction and *unconventional* modes of political activity (such as online engagement, participation in demonstrations, and signing petitions). This kind of activism has often been associated with lower life satisfaction (e.g., Barnes et al. 1979; Lorenzini 2015; Marsh 1977), so our results confirm Hypothesis 7 and support this stream of findings. After finding that voting is positively associated with life satisfaction in Latin America, Weitz-Shapiro and Winters (2011, 119) speculated: “Although happier people may be more likely to vote, perhaps those less satisfied with their lives are more likely to contact their elected representatives or participate in protests.” We provide evidence from Europe supporting this speculation.

Nonetheless, we infer that the general hypothesis—that political integration is indeed a correlate (if not causally related to) of life satisfaction, is supported. Voting is certainly the most conventional aspect among the specific modes of participation covered by the included ESS variables. Not only is it the most widespread, but it also represents the acceptance of the political system and involvement, or integration, into formal political life. Voting does not require any additional motivation

(although it may include) except the feeling of duty and acceptance of the basic rules of political life in a democracy (procedural utility); hence, the positive association with life satisfaction. The other activities listed here under both conventional and unconventional categories require additional motivation, which often might be the belief that voting is insufficient or ineffective. Thus, while some of the unconventional activities, such as taking part in demonstrations, might sometimes involve crossing the borders of legality, the remaining activities are not that radically different from those categorized as conventional ones.⁸ It seems as if taking any political activity besides voting requires special motivation, which is somehow associated with lower life satisfaction. It may be that dissatisfaction with some political issue and the perception that perhaps voting does not change things is caused by lower life satisfaction. Likewise, lower life satisfaction, which may be caused by political dissatisfaction, may lead to political activism, both more or less conventional. In any case, the reciprocal causal direction may work here (Ding et al. 2015; Laurence 2021).

The literature is inconsistent regarding the hypothesized causal direction (e.g., Pirralha 2017, 2018; Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2011), and in the present study, we cannot disentangle it because we do not have adequate data. Here, we focus on the existence of the associations under the assumption that well-being is the dependent variable (as specified in the statistical models presented above). However, some studies tried disentangling the causal direction conundrum (e.g., Laurence 2021; Pirralha 2017, 2018). Relying on a 3-wave panel using the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) data, Pirralha (2018, 803) concluded that “our findings offer no support for the idea of a causal relationship between political participation and LS.”⁹ To make things more interesting, Ding et al. (2015, 252) found in Australia that “increasing informal social connectedness in one year most strongly predicts better mental health the next year, followed by civic engagement; while increased political participation in one year predicts *worse* mental health the next year” (emphasis in original).

The association of youth activism with reduced satisfaction levels may also be specific to periods of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. But, a more reliable answer will have to wait for future research with more adequate datasets. In any case, the diverse relationship with different indicators of political participation shows the value of differentiating modes of participation, especially the separation of voting from the rest of the conventional modes.

⁸For instance, the unconventional category includes activity named “online engagement”. However, authors such as Morozov (2009) find online participation as an illusion of participation. In his words, “‘Slackivism’ is an apt term to describe feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact.” (Morozov 2009).

⁹Similar is another Pirralha’s study, using Dutch LISS panel data. Again, “our results do not offer support for a link between political participation and individual wellbeing” (Pirralha 2017, 338).

4.7 Conclusion

The overall results support the hypothesis about the positive association of the three domains of social integration—social relationships, labor market integration, and some forms of political participation—with greater life satisfaction. We conclude that even in uncertain and unstable times, social capital is one of the crucial resources for young people to build their own resilience, as reflected in a higher degree of life satisfaction.

The lack of integration into a broader society, as reflected in belonging to a discriminated ethnic minority, is also a significant predictor of reduced life satisfaction. Perhaps the context of the pandemic, when various minorities in Europe had harder-than-average times, only enhanced this negative association. Overall, regarding social integration, the results show that affiliation with a close circle of people with whom a young person can establish a quality relationship and living in a society where a young person feels included both contribute to higher life satisfaction.

Interestingly, however, social contacts that come with in-office work do not seem to count as contributing to life satisfaction. It may be due to the pandemic's context, but remote work proved to be a significant source of satisfaction for the youth rather than in-office work. Apart from that, labor market integration, as indicated by being in the labor force (employed), emerged as a highly significant determinant of life satisfaction.

The results also confirmed some of the hypotheses about the contribution of political participation to life satisfaction. Corroborating numerous previous findings, young European voters tend to express higher levels of life satisfaction, on average, compared to the abstainers.

However, other forms of political activism—both those activities classified as conventional (wearing a campaign badge, contacting a politician, or being active in a political party or action group) and unconventional ones (e.g., participation in protests and demonstrations)—are negatively associated with life satisfaction. The negative association of life satisfaction with unconventional participation is not uncommon in literature, perhaps showing that dissatisfaction is an important motivator of political activism. It is less commonly observed that conventional forms of participation are also associated with reduced life satisfaction.

Future research endeavors should be focused on longitudinal research for a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of the correlations identified in the present study, particularly in the context of a post-pandemic world. This strategic focus would enable us to discern whether the observed role of social integration is a reflection of the health crisis period, or indicative of a “new reality,” signifying more enduring transformations in the behaviors and attitudes of the youth demographic.

References

- Ahmadiani, M., S. Ferreira, and J. Kessler. 2022. What makes people happy? Evidence from International Data. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 23 (5): 2083–2111. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-021-00478-y>.
- Ahmed, A., M. Lundahl, and E. Wadensjö. 2023. Ethnic discrimination during the Covid-19 pandemic. In *Migration and integration in a post-pandemic world: Socioeconomic opportunities and challenges*, ed. L. Lerpold, Ö. Sjöberg, and K. Wennberg, 291–314. Cham: Springer.
- Ahn, H., S.J. Roll, W. Zeng, J.J. Frey, S. Reiman, and J. Ko. 2016. Impact of income inequality on workers' life satisfaction in the US: A multilevel analysis. *Social Indicators Research* 128: 1347–1363.
- Alesina, A., R. Di Tella, and R. MacCulloch. 2004. Inequality and happiness: are Europeans and Americans different? *Journal of Public Economics* 88 (9–10): 2009–2042. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2003.07.006>.
- Amichai-Hamburger, Y., M. Kingsbury, and B.H. Schneider. 2013. Friendship: An old concept with a new meaning? *Computers in Human Behavior* 29 (1): 33–39.
- Anderton, R., V. Botelho, A. Consolo, A. Dias da Silva, C. Foroni, M. Mohr, and L. Vivian. 2020. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the euro area labour market. *Economic Bulletin*, issue 8, ECB. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/ecb/ecbart/202100082.html>.
- Arnett, J.J. 2014. *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199929382.001.0001>.
- Baarck, J., A. Balahur-Dobrescu, L.G. Cassio, B. D'hombres, Z. Pasztor, and G. Tintori. 2021. *Loneliness in the EU. Insights from surveys and online media data*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2760/46553>. JRC125873.
- Barnes, S.H., M. Kaase, K.R. Allerback, B. Farah, F. Heunks, and R. Inglehart. 1979. *Political action: Mass participation in five Western democracies*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Beck, U. 1992. *Risk society*. London: Sage.
- Berg, M., and R. Veenhoven. 2010. Income inequality and happiness in 119 nations, Chapter 11. In *Social policy and happiness in Europe*, ed. Bent Greve, 174–194. Cheltenham, UK: Edgar Elgar.
- Birditt, K.S., A. Turkelson, K.L. Fingerman, C. Polenick, and A. Oya. 2021. Age differences in stress, life changes, and social ties during the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for psychological well-being. *The Gerontologist* 61 (2): 205–216.
- Boeck, T. 2007. Young people, social capital and the navigation of life transitions. *Paper for the DfES Youth Strategy Review*. Leicester: DfES. <https://dora.dmu.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/2086/4975/BoeckPhD.pdf>. Accessed 22 Dec 2023.
- Chesters, J., and H. Cuervo. 2019. Adjusting to new employment landscapes: Consequences of precarious employment for young Australians. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 30 (2): 222–240. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1035304619832740>.
- Cheung, F. 2018. Income redistribution predicts greater life satisfaction across individual, national, and cultural characteristics. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 115 (5): 867–882. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000164>.
- Ciziceno, M. 2022. The conceptions of quality of life, wellness and well-being: A literature review. In *Sport and quality of life: Practices, habits and lifestyles*, Social indicators research series, ed. P. Corvo and F. Massimo Lo Verde, vol. 84, 11–27. Cham: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-93092-9_2.
- Clair, R., M. Gordon, M. Kroon, and C. Reilly. 2021. The effects of social isolation on well-being and life satisfaction during pandemic. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8 (1): 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00710-3>.
- Crocetti, E., and W. Meeus. 2014. “Family comes first!” Relationships with family and friends in Italian emerging adults. *Journal of Adolescence* 37 (8): 1463–1473.

- Crowley, F., and E. Walsh. 2018. How important are personal ties, trust and tolerance for life satisfaction in Europe? *SRERC working paper series, no. SRERCWP2018-1*. Cork: University College Cork, Spatial and Regional Economic Research Centre (SRERC). <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/195053>.
- . 2021. Tolerance, social capital, and life satisfaction: A multilevel model from transition countries in the European Union. *Review of Social Economy* 82 (1): 23–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00346764.2021.1957994>.
- Degutis, M., S. Urbonavičius, and A. Gaižutis. 2010. Relation between GDP and life satisfaction in the European Union. *Ekonomika* 89 (1): 9–21.
- Delhey, J., and G. Dragolov. 2016. Happier together. Social cohesion and subjective well-being in Europe. *International Journal of Psychology* 51 (3): 163–176.
- Ding, N., H.L. Berry, and L.V. O’Brien. 2015. One-year reciprocal relationship between community participation and mental well-being in Australia: A panel analysis. *Social Science & Medicine* 128: 246–254. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.01.022>.
- Dorn, D., Fischer, J. A., Kirchgässner, G., & Sousa-Poza, A. (2008). Direct democracy and life satisfaction revisited: new evidence for Switzerland. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 9, 227–255. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-007-9050-9>.
- Drouin, M., B.T. McDaniel, J. Pater, and T. Toscos. 2020. How parents and their children used social media and technology at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and associations with anxiety. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 23 (11): 727–736.
- Elias, A., J. Ben, F. Mansouri, and Y. Paradies. 2021. Racism and nationalism during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44 (5): 783–793.
- Eurofound. 2021. *Living, working and COVID-19 (Update April 2021)—Mental health and trust decline across EU as pandemic enters another year*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/system/files/2021-11/ef21064en.pdf>. Accessed 2 Jan 2024. <https://doi.org/10.2806/76802>.
- European Union. 2022. The effects of COVID-19 on youth employment. European Youth Portal. https://youth.europa.eu/news/effects-of-covid-19-youth-employment_en. Accessed 24 Dec 2023.
- Eurostat. 2021. *Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income—EU-SILC survey*. Luxembourg: European Commission in Luxembourg City. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tessi190/default/table>.
- Ezzy, D. 1993. Unemployment and mental health. A critical review. *Social Science and Medicine* 37: 41–52.
- Fernandes, B., U.N. Biswas, R.T. Mansukhani, A.V. Casarín, and C.A. Essau. 2020. The impact of COVID-19 lockdown on internet use and escapism in adolescents. *Revista de psicología clínica con niños y adolescentes* 7 (3): 59–65.
- Fieldhouse, E., M. Tranmer, and A. Russell. 2007. Something about young people or something about elections? Electoral participation of young people in Europe: Evidence from a multi-level analysis of the European Social Survey. *European Journal of Political Research* 46 (6): 797–822. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2007.00713.x>.
- Flavin, P., and M. Keane. 2012. Life satisfaction and political participation: Evidence from the United States. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 13 (1): 63–78. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-011-9250-1>.
- Fouskas, T., G. Koulierakis, F.M. Mine, A. Theofilopoulos, S. Konstantopoulou, F. Ortega-de-Mora, D. Georgiadis, and G. Pantazi. 2022. Racial and ethnic inequalities, health disparities and racism in times of COVID-19 pandemic populism in the EU: Unveiling anti-migrant attitudes, precarious living conditions and barriers to integration in Greece. *Societies* 12 (6): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc12060189>.
- Fox, S. 2014. Is it time to update the definition of political participation? *Parliamentary Affairs* 67 (2): 495–505. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gss094>.
- Frey, B., and A. Stutzer. 2000a. Happiness, economy and institutions. *The Economic Journal* 110 (466): 918–938. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0297.00570>.

- . 2000b. Happiness prospers in democracy. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 1 (1): 79–102. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1010028211269>.
- . 2002. *Happiness and economics: How the economy and institutions affect human well-being*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fryer, D. 1986. Employment deprivation and personal agency during unemployment: A critical discussion of Jahoda's explanation of the psychological effects of unemployment. *Social Behaviour* 1 (1): 3–23.
- Furlong, A. 2012. *Youth studies: An introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Furlong, A., and F. Cartmel. 1997. *Young people and social change: Individualization and risk in late modernity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Furlong, A., J. Goodwin, H. O'Connor, S. Hadfield, S. Hall, K. Lowden, and R. Plugor. 2017. *Young people in the labour market: Past, present, future. Series: Youth, young adulthood and society*. London: Routledge.
- Gajendran, R.S., and D.A. Harrison. 2007. The good, the bad, and the unknown about telecommuting: Meta-analysis of psychological mediators and individual consequences. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 92: 1524–1541. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.6.1524>.
- Gould, E., and V. Wilson. 2020. *Black workers face two of the most lethal preexisting conditions for coronavirus—racism and economic inequality*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/>. Accessed 12 Dec 2023.
- Graafland, J., and B. Lous. 2018. Economic freedom, income inequality and life satisfaction in OECD countries. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 19: 2071–2093. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-017-9905-7>.
- Granovetter, M.S. 1973. The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (6): 1360–1380.
- Hajdu, T., and G. Hajdu. 2014. Reduction of income inequality and subjective well-being in Europe. *Economics* 8 (1): 20140035. <https://doi.org/10.5018/economics-ejournal.ja.2014-35>.
- He, L., K. Wang, T. Liu, T. Li, and B. Zhu. 2022. Does political participation help improve the life satisfaction of urban residents: Empirical evidence from China. *PLoS One* 17 (10): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0273525>.
- Helliwell, J. F., 2006. Well-being, social capital and public policy: what's new?. *The economic journal*, 116(510): C34–C45. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0297.2006.01074.x>.
- Helliwell, J. F., G. Schellenberg, and J. Fonberg. 2020. *Life satisfaction in Canada before and during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11F0019M—No. 457. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2020020-eng.pdf>. Accessed 21 Dec 2023.
- Inglehart, R.F. 2018. The silent revolution in reverse: The rise of Trump and the authoritarian populist parties. In *Cultural evolution, people's motivations are changing, and reshaping the world*, 173–199. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108613880>.
- Irizar, P., D. Pan, D. Kapadia, L. Bécares, S. Sze, H. Taylor, S. Amele, E. Kibuchi, P. Divall, L.J. Gray, L.B. Nellums, S.V. Katikireddi, and M. Pareek. 2023. Ethnic inequalities in COVID-19 infection, hospitalisation, intensive care admission, and death: A global systematic review and meta-analysis of over 200 million study participants. *EClinicalMedicine* 57: 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclim.2023.101877>.
- Jahoda, M. 1981. Work, employment, and unemployment: Values, theories, and approaches in social research. *American Psychologist* 36 (2): 184–191. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.36.2.184>.
- Jongbloed, J., and J.F. Giret. 2022. Quality of life of NEET youth in comparative perspective: Subjective well-being during the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Youth Studies* 25 (3): 321–343. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1869196>.
- Katikireddi, S.V., S. Lal, E.D. Carrol, C.L. Niedzwiedz, K. Khunti, R. Dundas, and B. Barr. 2021. Unequal impact of the COVID-19 crisis on minority ethnic groups: A framework for understanding and addressing inequalities. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 75 (10): 970–974. <https://doi.org/10.1136/jech-2020-216061>.

- Kondratowicz, B., D. Godlewska-Werner, P. Połomski, and M. Khosla. 2022. Satisfaction with job and life and remote work in the COVID-19 pandemic: The role of perceived stress, self-efficacy and self-esteem. *Current Issues in Personality Psychology* 10 (1): 49–60. <https://doi.org/10.5114/cipp.2021.108097>.
- Konle-Seidl, R., and F. Picarella. 2021. *Youth in Europe: Effects of COVID-19 on their economic and social situation*. Luxembourg: Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies Directorate-General for Internal Policies, European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662942/IPOL_STU\(2021\)662942_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662942/IPOL_STU(2021)662942_EN.pdf).
- Kööts-Ausmees, L., and A. Realo. 2016. Life satisfaction among ethnic minorities in Europe. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 47 (3): 457–478.
- Laurence, J. 2021. The impact of youth engagement on life satisfaction: A quasi-experimental field study of a UK national youth engagement scheme. *European Sociological Review* 37 (2): 305–329. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcaa059>.
- Lenoir, R., and K.K.Y. Wong. 2023. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people from black and mixed ethnic groups' mental health in West London: A qualitative study. *BMJ Open* 13 (5): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2023-071903>.
- Lindholm, A. 2020. Does subjective well-being affect political participation? *Swiss Journal of Sociology* 46 (3): 467–488. <https://doi.org/10.2478/sjs-2020-0023>.
- Litam, S.D.A., and S. Oh. 2021. Effects of COVID-19-related racial discrimination on depression and life satisfaction among young, middle, and older Chinese Americans. *Adultspan Journal* 20 (2): 70–84. <https://doi.org/10.1002/adsp.12111>.
- Lorenzini, J. 2015. Subjective well-being and political participation: A comparison of unemployed and employed youth. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 16 (2): 381–404. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-014-9514-7>.
- MacDonald, R. 2017. Precarious work: The growing precarity of youth. In *Routledge handbook of youth and young adulthood*, ed. A. Furlong, 2nd ed., 156–163. London: Routledge.
- Marsh, A. 1977. *Protest and political consciousness*, Vol. 49, Sage library of social research. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Morozov, E. 2009. The brave new world of slacktivism. *Foreign Policy* 19 (5) <https://tinyurl.com/y7tl6xqz>. Accessed 10 Sept 2018.
- Onal, O., F.Y. Evcil, E. Dogan, M. Develi, E. Uskun, and A.N. Kisioglu. 2022. The effect of loneliness and perceived social support among older adults on their life satisfaction and quality of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Educational Gerontology* 48 (7): 331–343.
- Owen, A.L., J. Videras, and C. Willemsen. 2008. Democracy, participation, and life satisfaction. *Social Science Quarterly* 89 (4): 987–1005. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6237.2008.00595.x>.
- Pacheco, G., and T. Lange. 2010. Political participation and life satisfaction: A cross-European analysis. *International Journal of Social Economics* 37 (9): 686–702. <https://doi.org/10.1108/03068291011062489>.
- Palmer, A.N., and E. Small. 2021. COVID-19 and disconnected youth: Lessons and opportunities from OECD countries. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health* 49 (7): 779–789. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14034948211017017>.
- Pilkington, H., and G. Pollock. 2015. “Politics are bollocks”: Youth, politics and activism in contemporary Europe. *The Sociological Review* 63 (2_suppl): 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954x.12260>.
- Pirralha, A. 2017. Political participation and well-being in the Netherlands: Exploring the causal links. *Applied Research in Quality of Life* 12 (2): 327–341. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11482-016-9463-x>.
- . 2018. The link between political participation and life satisfaction: A three wave causal analysis of the German SOEP household panel. *Social Indicators Research* 138 (2): 793–807.
- Pittau, M.G., R. Zelli, and A. Gelman. 2010. Economic disparities and life satisfaction in European regions. *Social Indicators Research* 96 (2): 339–361. <https://EconPapers.repec.org/RePEc:spr:soinre:v:96:y:2010:i:2:p:339-361>.

- Pitti, I. 2018. Unconventional political participation: An overview. In *Youth and unconventional political engagement*, ed. I. Pitti, 7–21. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75591-5_2.
- Platt, L. 2021. COVID-19 and ethnic inequalities in England. *LSE Public Policy Review* 2021/1 (4): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.33>.
- Platt, L., and R. Warwick. 2020. *Are some ethnic groups more vulnerable to COVID-19 than others*. The Institute for Fiscal Studies, Nuffield Foundation. ISBN 978-1-912805-75-4. <https://blcf.org.uk/assets/dei/EthnicVulnerabilityCovid.pdf>. Accessed 3 Jan 2024.
- Plenty, S., C. Bracegirdle, J. Dollmann, and O. Spiegler. 2021. Changes in young adults' mental well-being before and during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic: Disparities between ethnic groups in Germany. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health* 15 (1): 1–14.
- Putnam, R.D. 2000. *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Quintelier, E. 2007. Differences in political participation between young and old people. *Contemporary Politics* 13 (2): 165–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569770701562658>.
- Rothgerber, H., T. Wilson, D. Whaley, D.L. Rosenfeld, M. Humphrey, A.L. Moore, and A. Bihl. 2020. Politicizing the COVID-19 pandemic: Ideological differences in adherence to social distancing [Preprint]. *PsyArXiv*. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/k23cv>. Accessed 3 Jan 2024.
- Runciman, W.G. 1966. *Relative deprivation and social justice: A study of attitudes to social inequality in twentieth-century England*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Sabucedo, J.M., and C. Arce. 1991. Types of political participation: A multidimensional analysis. *European Journal of Political Research* 20 (1): 93–102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1991.tb00257.x>.
- Sarmiento Prieto, J.P., C.P. Castro-Correa, A. Arrieta, M. Jerath, and S. Arensburg. 2023. Relevance of social capital in preserving subjective well-being in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy* 14 (2): 159–178.
- Schröder, M. 2016. How income inequality influences life satisfaction: Hybrid effects evidence from the German SOEP. *European Sociological Review* 32 (2): 307–320.
- Susilo, D. 2020. Revealing the effect of work-from home on job performance during the COVID-19 crisis: Empirical evidence from Indonesia. *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Business & Government* 26: 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.47750/cibg.2020.26.01.002>.
- Towner, E., L. Tomova, D. Ladensack, K. Chu, and B. Callaghan. 2022. Virtual social interaction and loneliness among emerging adults amid the COVID-19 pandemic. *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology* 3: 100058. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cresp.2022.100058>.
- UNICEF. 2020. *Averting a lost COVID generation: A six point plan to respond, recover and reimagine a post-pandemic world for every child*. United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), November 2020. New York: UNICEF. <https://www.unicef.org/media/86881/file/Averting-a-lost-covid-generation-world-childrens-day-data-and-advocacy-brief-2020.pdf>. Accessed 3 Jan 2024.
- Vancea, M., and M. Utzet. 2017. How unemployment and precarious employment affect the health of young people: A scoping study on social determinants. *Scand J Public Health* 45 (1): 73–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1403494816679555>.
- Van Deth, J.W. 2014. A conceptual map of political participation. *Acta politica* 49 (3): 349–367. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ap.2014.6>.
- Vega-Tinoco, A., A.I. Gil-Lacruz, and M. Gil-Lacruz. 2022. Civic participation as a promoter of well-being: Comparative analysis among European countries. *Social Indicators Research* 164 (1): 217–237. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-022-02947-0>.
- Verba, S., and N.H. Nie. 1972. *Participation in America*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Verme, P. 2011. Life satisfaction and income inequality. *Review of Income and Wealth* 57: 111–127.
- Voßemer, J., and N. Eunicke. 2015. The impact of labor market exclusion and job insecurity on health and well-being among youth—a literature review. *EXCEPT working papers, WP no 2*. Tallinn: Tallinn University. <http://www.exceptproject.eu/working-papers/>.

- Wang, S., C. Xiabing, L. Yong, L. Chloé, Y. Ran, and F. Madrisotti. 2021. "I'm more afraid of racism than of the virus!": Racism awareness and resistance among Chinese migrants and their descendants in France during the Covid-19 pandemic. *European Societies* 23 (S1): S721–S742.
- Warr, P.B. 1987. *Work, unemployment, and mental health*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weiss, J. 2020. What is youth political participation? Literature review on youth political participation and political attitudes. *Frontiers in Political Science* 2: 1. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2020.00001>.
- Weitz-Shapiro, R., and M.S. Winters. 2011. The link between voting and life satisfaction in Latin America. *Latin American Politics and Society* 53 (4): 101–126.
- World Bank. 2022. *GDP per capita, PPP (current international \$)*. World Bank Data. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD>.

Dragan Stanojević is an Assistant Professor at the University of Belgrade Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Sociology. His research is focused on family relations, youth and children, political participation, social inequalities, social inclusion, and life course patterns. He served as the NC of the European Social Survey in Serbia during its IX and X rounds. He is actively involved in various research activities across Europe, contributing as a senior researcher within the Pool of European Youth Researchers (PEYR) and the European Platform for Learning Mobility (EPLM).

Bojan Todosijević is a Principal research fellow at the Centre for Political Studies and Public Opinion Research, Institute of Social Sciences (IDN), Belgrade, Serbia. His research covers topics such as the structure of social attitudes, the influence of ideological orientations on political attitudes and behavior, nationalist attitudes, political intolerance, and populist ideology. More recently, his focus turned towards electoral behavior in Serbia. A comparative approach and quantitative methodology characterize his research and publications. He is an expert on statistical data analysis and public opinion research methodology.

Anja Gvozdanović is a Senior Research Associate in the field of sociology, affiliated with the Centre for Youth and Gender Studies at the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb, Croatia. Her research interests include youth sociology, political culture, social capital, values and social trust, reconciliation and peacebuilding in Croatia and Western Balkans.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

