Mandated vs. voluntary social isolation and mental health
An examination of the psychological effects of social isolation at the onset of COVID-19.

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Introduction

A growing body of research suggests that adverse mental health outcomes stem from the restrictions in lifestyle that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought on.

- Pancani et al., (2021) empathizes that improper socialization leads to a cognitive decline. Social disconnection can induce negative emotions such as anger and sadness.

- While social distancing was associated with more psychological distress, **fear of economic uncertainty** seemed to predict more variability in anxiety, depression, and life satisfaction in adults (Kämpfen et al., 2020).

- Reizer et al. (2021) suggest that an **intolerance of uncertainty** is associated with psychological distress in parents who are required to work from home due to social distancing requirements.

- Best et al. (2020) found an association between social distancing and psychological distress, and this **varied as a function of education**. Specifically, those without at least a college degree experience more distress.

- Kirpinar (2020) suggests that it is not social distancing itself, but the failure to maintain a **personal support network**, that makes one more likely to suffer from cognitive distortions, including feelings of insecurity, helplessness, and uncertainty.

Research Question

The purpose of this study is to build on this body of research by asking, "Which reasons for social distancing have an effect on mental health?"

Independent Variable:
- *Reasons for Social Distancing;* (Mandatory, Voluntary, Mixed, Not Social Distancing)

Dependent Variables:
- Depression, Anxiety, Loneliness, Life Satisfaction

> We hypothesize that poor mental health, as measured by depression, anxiety, loneliness, and low life satisfaction will be greater for those who are mandated into social distancing.

Participants

- *N* = 501; 382 Females, 104 Males, 15 No Response ; Age (*M* = 35.31, *SD* = 15.50)

Materials & Procedure

- Online surveys using snowball/convenience sampling
- **Daily Affect Scale:** 1-item measuring each of three variables on a scale from 1 (haven't felt that way at all) to 5 (have felt that way a lot) in the last 48 hours.
  - Depression ("sad, unhappy, or depressed")
  - Anxiety ("on edge, tense, or nervous")
  - Loneliness ("lonely, isolated, or empty")
- **Satisfaction with Life Scale:** 7-items from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree). Higher scores indicate higher life satisfaction.
- Example items include:
  - "I am satisfied with my life."
  - "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing".

Reasons for Social Distancing

> Participants were asked to check all that apply and are grouped as "mandatory" if they only selected option 1 or 2; "voluntary" if the selected only options 3-6; "mixed" if they selected from items 1-2 and 3-6.

- [ ] 1. I was mandated to go into isolation by a medical professional.
- [ ] 2. I was mandated to go into isolation by a governmental official.
- [ ] 3. I voluntarily went into isolation to keep myself safe.
- [ ] 4. I was not directly told to isolate, but I am because I feel it is my duty as citizen to do so.
- [ ] 5. I am voluntarily in isolation to keep a vulnerable family member safe.
- [ ] 6. I am voluntarily isolating because I have symptoms or have been exposed to someone who has symptoms of COVID-19.

Analysis

Multiple One-Way ANOVAs were conducted to evaluate the effects of social distancing on scores of depression, anxiety, loneliness, and life satisfaction. **The ANOVAs showed no significant results for any of the dependent variables**. See Figure 1.

- Depression $F_{(3,496)} = 0.234$, $p = 0.873$, Anxiety $F_{(3,496)} = 0.523$, $p = 0.667$, Loneliness $F_{(3,496)} = 0.9$, $p = 0.441$, Life satisfaction $F_{(3,493)} = 1.765$, $p = 0.153$.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of measures

Measures	M	SD
Depression	3.49	1.62
Anxiety	3.68	1.61
Loneliness	3.36	1.80
Life Satisfaction	3.47	0.71

*Note: All variables were all measured on a scale from 1-5.

Figure 1. Mean differences in dependent variables by reason for social distancing

Legend: ■ Mandatory (N=35) ■ Voluntary (N=118) ■ Mixed (N=237) ■ None (N=110)
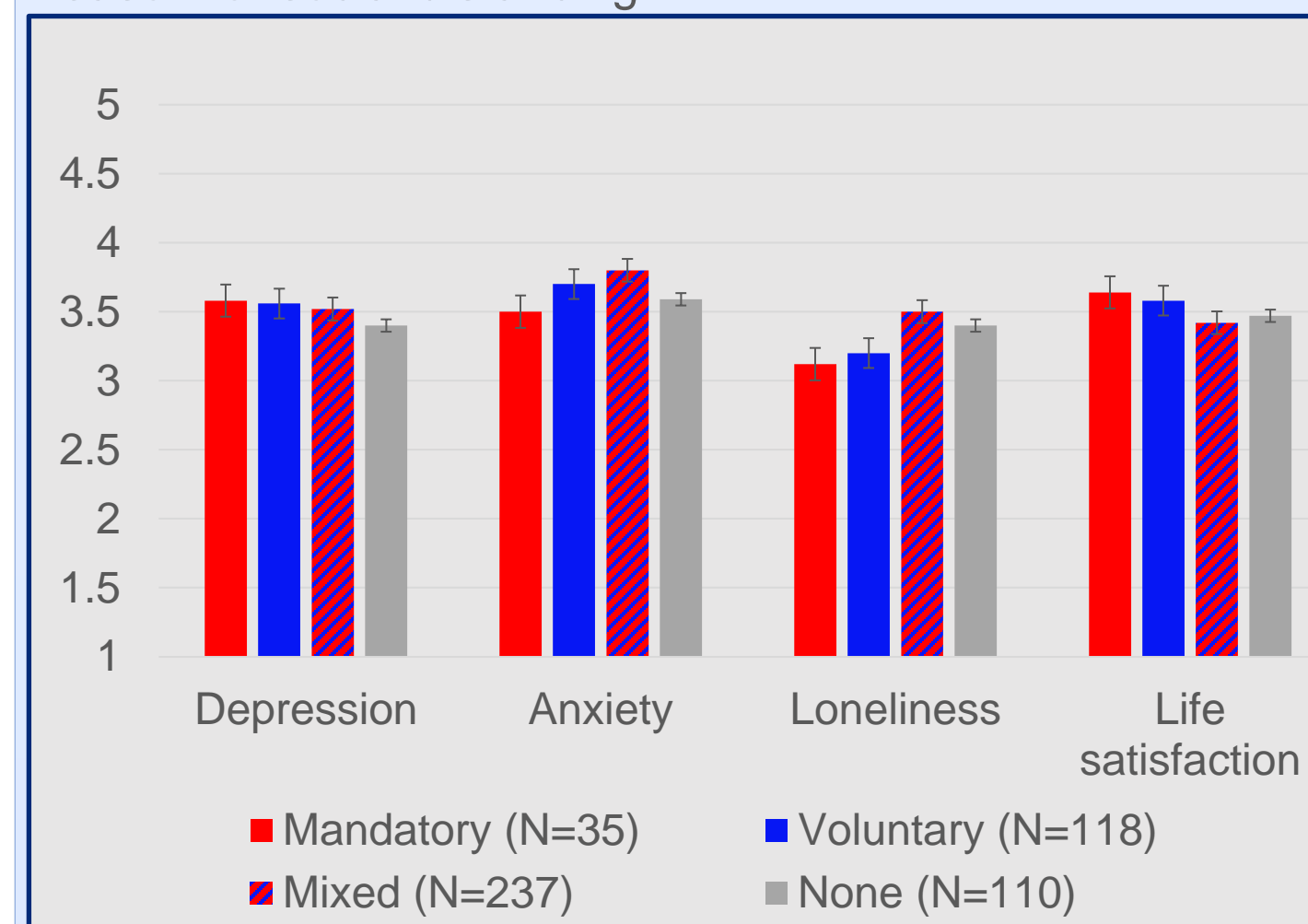
Discussion

Our hypothesis that mandatory social distancing will have greatest effect on levels of depression, anxiety, loneliness, or life satisfaction **was not supported.**
- This could be due to other personal factors that may negate the effect social distancing plays on psychological stressors.

- The access to and **use of technology** to stay connected to others may mitigate the psychological stressors associated with social distancing and social isolation in times of the COVID-19 pandemic (Saltzman et al., 2020).

- Other factors, such as the extent to which social distancing impacts **a person's daily routine** (Castaldelli-Maia et al., 2021) might have a greater impact on psychological distress. Perhaps **education level** moderates this effect (Best et al. 2020).

- Overall, there are many contributing factors that play a role in determining one's psychological functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic, but **reason for social distancing does not seem to contribute.**

- **Future research should explore the potential for cognitive dissonance in the "mixed" category**. Some participants may have been forced out of social distancing by work or family demands, and it stands to reason that this would produce qualitatively different stresses than those who are not forced to make that choice (Chakraborty et al., 2021).

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