

project analysis of governmental policy: RESEARCH RAPPORT



TOGETHER AGAINST LONELINESS

COMMUNITY INITIATIVES IN AMSTERDAM NEW WEST

Management, Policy Analysis and Entrepreneurship in Health and Life Sciences
Course, Analysis of Governmental Policy
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Amsterdam, October 22th 2020

Executive Summary

Loneliness is a growing problem in the Netherlands and more than 10% of the population over the age of 15 indicates to feel frequently lonely. Research conducted by the GGD (Gemeentelijke Gezondheidsdienst/ Municipal Health Service) has shown that Amsterdam has one of the highest percentages of people that feel lonely, namely 47%. This can partially be explained by the higher proportion of singles and non-western inhabitants that live in Amsterdam (GGD Amsterdam, 2017). Furthermore, loneliness differs per district in Amsterdam with the highest percentages in Amsterdam New West, where 16% of the inhabitants indicate to feel lonely in comparison with 11% in Amsterdam (GGD Amsterdam, 2017). This can be explained by the different social-economical statuses, ethnic background, and the demographic structure of Amsterdam New West. In addition, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the minimization of social contacts can intensify the feelings of loneliness and therefore lead to an increase in rates. As a consequence, inhabitants of Amsterdam New West needed to find ways to cope with feelings of loneliness. Some new community initiatives have emerged during the pandemic, others were adapted in such a manner that they could continue safely. Community organizations that develop initiatives started a collaboration with the Knowledge Alliance Loneliness in Amsterdam, that specifically tackle loneliness in Amsterdam New West by setting up, monitoring and strengthening social initiatives. However, it remains unclear which aspects of the initiatives of the partner organisations were successful in tackling the feelings of loneliness. Moreover, several aspects of initiatives are not clearly understood and not known by citizens.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to make recommendations to the Knowledge Alliance in order to contribute to the knowledge about and effectively cope with loneliness in Amsterdam New West by identifying successful aspects and barriers of community initiatives in Amsterdam New West aimed at tackling loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A qualitative design was chosen and 12 different community initiative executors in Amsterdam New West were interviewed by using a semi-structured interview design focusing on mental health, social support, well-being, societal perception, self-constructs, and the successful aspects of the initiative. The probing was done through purposive sampling and by using the snowball method. The interviews led to a more in-depth insight in the perception of executors on what makes an initiative successful and what aspects are of importance.

There are three overarching themes emerged from the coding and linking of categories and subcategories that play a crucial role in answering our research question. These themes are subdivided into different categories. The first theme, tackling loneliness, is subdivided into social support, empowerment, sense of belonging and mental health. The second theme, the focus of initiatives, is divided in theory and evaluation. The third theme, resilience, is divided into creativity/flexibility, technology, collaboration and accessibility.

The main barriers that were identified within the community initiatives were associated with knowledge gaps in the agreement on the theory of loneliness and how to tackle loneliness effectively. Another important limitation is that the outcomes are not generalisable to all the initiatives and the information from the interviews is limited.

Based on the successful aspects and barriers of community initiatives aiming to tackle loneliness, several recommendations can be made on organizational- and governmental level. The first recommendation to tackle loneliness is through the empowerment of the participants by integrating participants in the decision-making process. Also, the empowerment of the participants can be developed by the execution of activities with long term impact on somebody's life. The second recommendation is to reach consensus on the definition of loneliness through the collaboration with different initiatives and the development of an own conceptual framework. The third recommendation is to make the initiative more accessible to reach more people who are lonely. This can be done, for example, by lowering the costs in demographic areas with low socio-economic status such as Amsterdam New West and increasing the costs in areas with higher socio-economical positions. In addition, certain

initiatives could make participation free once a month or provide a 'pay as you go' policy instead of making use of subscriptions, thereby making it more accessible to participate. Moreover, initiatives could utilize the 'refer a friend' model where participants can get specific rewards when referring a friend, which eventually also increases participation. Furthermore, initiatives can focus on strengthening the functional support by making use of smaller groups, so that participants feel more at ease and thus participate more quickly in an initiative. Lastly, it is important to provide service throughout the year to give the participants more routine and continuity in their daily lives.

With this knowledge, the Knowledge Alliance Loneliness can provide help to the different initiatives tackling loneliness. With this help the initiatives can be improved, which also positively affects the feeling of loneliness.

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Introduction

Loneliness is a growing problem in The Netherlands, with recent studies showing that nearly 10% of the Dutch people over 15 years are frequently lonely, whereas 26% sometimes feel lonely ("Nearly 1 in 10 Dutch people are frequently lonely in 2019," 2020). Loneliness can be defined as a subjective experience that is influenced by somebody's personality, history and situational variables (Cacioppo, Hawkley, & Berntson, 2003). Studies show that the feeling of loneliness can have a severe negative impact on physical and mental health (Wu, 2020 and Luchetti et al., 2020).

Adding to the expanding societal issue of loneliness, is the current global pandemic. It started in december 2019, when a novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, was identified in Wuhan, China. Clinical features of a coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) include severe acute respiratory distress syndrome and multiple organ failure (Singhal, 2020). The virus is highly contagious by its spread through direct aerosols and possibly other, indirect ways of transmission. Due to these characteristics, the outbreak of COVID-19 led to a global pandemic in the beginning of 2020. To illustrate the severity of this disease, up till now, the virus has led to the death of over one million people, with the number of confirmed infected cases nearly reaching 30 million globally (World Health Organization, 2020).

To contain the spread of the virus and alleviate the burden on hospitals the government in the Netherlands introduced several social restrictions. For most people, the strict measures heavily impacted their social interactions which could lead to a reinforced feeling of loneliness (Hwang, Rabheru, Peisah, Reichman, & Ikeda, 2020; van Tilburg, 2020). While most of the restrictions remain in place, the estimation is that more people have or still will experience loneliness. Furthermore, for the people who already felt lonely prior to the arrival of the corona pandemic, the degree of their loneliness could intensify further ("Eén tegen eenzaamheid", 2020).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, moderate and severe loneliness were already more common in Amsterdam than compared to the rest of the Netherlands. These differences between Amsterdam in comparison to the whole of The Netherlands can be partially explained by the higher proportion of singles and non-Western origin habitants (GGD Amsterdam, 2017). In 2017, it was reported that 47% of the population in Amsterdam feels lonely at times, with another 13% of inhabitants stating they feel lonely on a regular basis (Lindeman, 2018). However, great variations exist between districts. Severe loneliness is especially high in the district of Amsterdam New West, where 16% of the habitants indicate to feel lonely in comparison with 11% in the rest of Amsterdam (GGD Amsterdam, 2017). These numbers show that loneliness in Amsterdam New West is significantly higher in comparison with the rest of Amsterdam. For as to why there is such a difference between districts, it can be debated that the different districts are prone to different social-economical statuses, demographic structures, and ethnic backgrounds (GGD Amsterdam, 2017).

To elaborate more on the differences of the ethnic background, for instance in the case of inhabitants with a non-Western background, a cause of loneliness can be found in the existing language barriers that result in lower participation in social activities compared to their native counterparts (Ten Kate, Bilecen, Steverink, & Castle, 2020). In 2016, 48% of the inhabitants of Amsterdam New West were from a non-Western background (GGD Amsterdam, 2018). When it comes to people with different educational backgrounds, low-income groups, and unemployed residents, Amsterdam New West had a percentage of 30%, 25%, and 9%, respectively. These groups possibly feel lonelier because of less social interaction at work, or even none in the case of unemployment.

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, inhabitants of Amsterdam New West needed to find ways to cope with feelings of loneliness. For many, social media platforms and video-calling services such as ZOOM and Skype were helpful in providing social interaction. However, the connections that were established using these resources were not always

equally valued as the real-life connections. Furthermore, these tools couldn't offer solace for everyone, as some people lacked access to or knowledge of these digital services. Some people relied on community initiatives focused on increasing social engagement to reduce their feelings of loneliness. Some community initiatives were either adapted or new ones have emerged in order to aid citizens in coping with loneliness during the times of the pandemic ("Steun tijdens Corona", 2020).

In Amsterdam, community organisations which create initiatives for the improvement of social cohesion have started a collaboration known as the Knowledge Alliance Loneliness. The Knowledge Alliance Loneliness wants to tackle loneliness among people specifically in Amsterdam New West by setting up, monitoring, and strengthening community initiatives (GGD Amsterdam, 2018). They want to gain insight into initiatives and good practices to reduce loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is still unclear whether the projects organised by the partner organisations of the Knowledge Alliance Loneliness were successful in tackling the feeling of loneliness. Furthermore, many aspects of these initiatives are not clearly understood, and some citizens are not even aware of their existence ("Voor elkaar Osdorp Midden - Buurtwerk Combiwel.", n.d.; "Voor elkaar Slotervaart Zuid - Buurtwerk Combiwel.", n.d.).

With the evident problem of loneliness in Amsterdam New West, and the current pandemic intensifying the issue further, finding adequate ways to diminish loneliness is crucial. Therefore, the objective of this study is to make recommendations to the Knowledge Alliance in order to contribute to the knowledge about and effectively cope with loneliness in Amsterdam New West by identifying successful aspects and barriers of community initiatives in Amsterdam New West aimed at reducing loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. For our research we interviewed executors from different community initiatives. In this report, the term 'community initiative' will be used to refer to a network of individuals and partner organizations committed to better the welfare and health within a community ("US Legal, I", n.d.). In order to reach these objectives, this research focuses on the following question: What are the successful aspects of community initiatives on reducing loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic and how can they be utilized to deal with loneliness in Amsterdam New West?

Contextual background

COVID-19 pandemic

The outbreak of COVID-19 had a large impact on the Netherlands. In March, the government announced an 'intelligent lockdown', which meant that people were required to stay at home as much as possible (Hoekman, Smits, & Koolman, 2020). Outside, everyone needed to keep a social distance of at least 1,5 meters from one another. Restaurants, museums, and other public places were closed (Van Tilburg et al., 2020).

This policy in the Netherlands is needed to ensure that people stay at a physically safe distance from one another, but additionally it led to a decrease in social interaction. While these measures are crucial to control the spread of the virus, it can have or already has serious consequences on mental health, such as an increased feeling of loneliness (Banerjee & Rai, 2020).

While the current social isolation may not directly lead to loneliness, earlier studies indicate that people feel increasingly lonely. However, the feelings of loneliness vary greatly among subpopulations. More than a third of adolescents report high levels of loneliness (Loades et al., 2020). The study of van Tilburg et al. (2020) stated that the average social loneliness increased slightly, and the average emotional loneliness increased much more strongly under older Dutch adults.

With the increasing feeling of loneliness among inhabitants, it is crucial to understand the harmful effects of loneliness. Loneliness is one of the most important indicators of social well-being and several studies have shown that loneliness is a risk factor for sensory loss, autoimmune disorders, cardio-vascular disorders, obesity, and all-cause mortality (Banerjee & Rai, 2020; Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017).

Demographics

A study of Bu et al. (2020) showed that the risk of experiencing loneliness was higher during the pandemic for different groups, such as adolescents, people with lower socioeconomic status, women, people who live alone, and ethnic minority groups (Krishnamoorthy, Nagarajan, Saya, & Menon, 2020). The demographics differ per municipality, and consequently influence the risk of experiencing loneliness. As stated previously, the percentage of lonely inhabitants in Amsterdam New West (16%) is higher than average. This 16% translates to an estimate of 17,000 people. Within these 17,000 people in Amsterdam New West there are numerous subgroups who experience loneliness (GGD Amsterdam, 2017).

There are many subgroups in Amsterdam New West with a relatively low-income, low-education, and without paid work. Also, more non-Western inhabitants live in Amsterdam New West. This group has a higher risk of loneliness than inhabitants with a Western background because they are more likely to not receive the needed (psychological) care. This phenomenon can also be seen in inhabitants with an unfavorable socioeconomic position (GGD Amsterdam, 2017). Furthermore, loneliness is equally common in men and women in this district. Similar to gender, there is no significant difference in experienced loneliness between different age groups.

Stakeholders

Multiple stakeholder groups are involved when it comes to the effectiveness of the initiatives in reducing loneliness in Amsterdam New West during the COVID-19 pandemic. The groups that are taken into consideration during this research are the following: the Dutch

government, World Health Organization (WHO), National Institute for Health and Environment (RIVM), The Knowledge Alliance Loneliness and the lonely citizens of Amsterdam New-West.

To organize an inclusive multi-stakeholder innovation process, we must start with identifying the key stakeholders and what their relation to the problem is as well as the power dynamics associated with their level of organization. Using a top-down approach in regard to organizational level our stakeholder analysis starts with the government at a macro perspective. The Dutch government implements the rules and regulations needed to safeguard public health during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the government oversees the national measures, additional measures can be installed by the municipality when considered necessary, as was the case for Amsterdam (Rijksoverheid, 2020; Veiligheidsregio Amsterdam-Amstelland, 2020).

An important stakeholder at meso-level is the WHO, which has an influential role in behavioural science in the fight against pandemics, alongside other essential expertise in fields such as virology, epidemiology, and medicine ("Applying behavioural science to COVID-19", 2020). In line with this priority, the RIVM is deploying scientific knowledge and expertise on human behaviour in a coordinated manner in the context of fighting the coronavirus pandemic ("Applying behavioural science to COVID-19", 2020). The RIVM also investigated the influence of policy measures on society, psychology and behaviour in the longer term.

Another stakeholder at meso-level is the commissioner of the project, Knowledge Alliance Loneliness, which is a collaboration between VU Amsterdam, HVA, Combiwel and VoorUit. This organization produces initiatives that are mainly involved with physical aspects of reducing loneliness and production/safeguarding of knowledge ("Voor organisaties - VoorUit," n.d.). The current pandemic makes it complex for the physical aspects of these initiatives to take place and could have implications on successful reduction of loneliness. In addition, there may be a bias against the use of e-Health solutions or potential innovative solutions, since most of the initiatives have been physical in nature. The Knowledge Alliance Loneliness has technical authority on the subject of loneliness and thus wields some form of power over individuals suffering from loneliness. These organizations have high interest in the research but wield less power than the governmental stakeholder.

Lastly, lonely individuals are also major stakeholders in the research behind successful initiatives that reduce loneliness, as they may be the direct consumer of the practical applications. Although their power dynamic is not high, they do have a major interest in the product of the analysis and thus should be taken into account in our research. Notably, more non-direct stakeholders could be involved in this research, such as businesses and hospitals. This is because loneliness has a plethora of off-target effects on society such as reduced productivity, which can affect hospital staff and employees (Bernstein & Turban, 2018). Suicides and other mental/physical issues also put strain on hospital resource allocation (Yaniv, 2001).

Developments

To reduce loneliness on a national scale, a strategy is to start on a smaller scale like a city district, in this case Amsterdam New West. The reasoning behind this is that an appropriate district health system is the level where merging health development can be managed easily in response to local conditions and needs, using available infrastructure and resources (World Health Organization, 2020). This can be later applied on a national level if successful.

There are many ways to try and reduce loneliness such as network development, standard reduction and learning to deal with loneliness. Firstly, network development entails entering into new relationships and/or improving or deepening existing ones. In these cases, the perceived difference between realized and desired relationships is reduced by bringing the realized relationships up to the level of the desired relationships ("Wat werkt bij de aanpak van eenzaamheid | Movisie," n.d.). Secondly, standard reduction involves adjustment of wishes and expectations that people have towards their relationships. Unrealistic wishes or high expectations of relationships are brought down by adapting them. Lastly, learning to deal with

loneliness entails the act of dealing with feelings of loneliness (“Wat werkt bij de aanpak van eenzaamheid | Movisie,” n.d.).

However, the current pandemic COVID-19 makes these three solutions harder to implement. The district of Amsterdam New West has tried numerous ways of reducing loneliness while also taking all the COVID-19 rules into consideration. Data gathered via a questionnaire of Knowledge Alliance Loneliness showed that neighbours are helping and supporting each other, send each other emails, have social contact at a 1.5 meter distance, and participate in the activities organized by Voor Elkaar in Amsterdam and art and culture activities (“Voor elkaar Slotervaart Zuid - Buurtwerk Combiwel,” n.d.).

Since 2018 both the Dutch Government and the municipality of Amsterdam have been working against loneliness. The Central government created a program ‘Eén tegen eenzaamheid’ (Together against loneliness) (Elsinga, 1989) to recognize and tackle loneliness within the elder population. This National Coalition is formed by civil society organizations, municipalities, companies and entrepreneurs who work together with the central government in nationwide and local partnerships against loneliness. The main goal is to decrease loneliness within the elderly Dutch population, by noticing loneliness in an earlier stage and diminishing the taboo around loneliness. Together with the collaborations within communities, this focus leads to a sustainable approach to reduction of loneliness.

An example of such a community collaboration, is the creation of a specific network tackling the loneliness in the city, ‘Amsterdams Network Eenzaamheid’ (Network of Loneliness Amsterdam) by the municipality of Amsterdam (Amsterdams Network Eenzaamheid, 2020). This network enables all the citizens of Amsterdam to connect with each other through activities in neighborhoods, social clubs or creative challenges. Stakeholders are the main pillars of this network, they work together closely and learn from each other to improve and be more effective during interventions. Those stakeholders consist of the municipality of Amsterdam, the community of Amsterdam, social alliances, research institutes, entrepreneurs and technical innovatives. Over time, the network analyses the effects of the activities and sums up the ones that were most effective in reducing loneliness.

Another initiative was a picture competition titled “Is this loneliness?” set up by the Knowledge Alliance Loneliness. This project tried to form the matter into something interactive, by letting locals capture their loneliness in pictures and share their stories (BOOT, 2020). With such initiatives this alliance aims to reduce loneliness in Amsterdam New-West. These initiatives have become even more important, because the COVID-19 pandemic has a severe economic, social, and organizational impact. However, there are a lot of people who are not aware of the activities that are being organized by the different agencies (“Voor elkaar Osdorp Midden - Buurtwerk Combiwel,” n.d.).

Theoretical Background

Definition of Loneliness

Loneliness has been characterized as a psychological condition, corresponding to a dissimilarity between an individual and social relations, either preferred or actual relationships with family and friends (Cacioppo et al., 2015). This difference can lead to a negative experience of feeling alone or socially isolated when surrounded with family and friends. Loneliness emphasizes the fact that human species require the presence of others, specifically other people whom they can trust, give them a goal in life, and whom they can interact and work together to survive and prosper (Cacioppo et al., 2008).

Loneliness is more likely to appear among people who are at risk for social alienation, isolation and separation, such as elderly living alone and isolated from friends and family. Nevertheless, loneliness is also evident across people surrounded by a large number of friends or numerous contacts on social media (Andersson, 1998).

Studies have identified that loneliness is a complex construct that consists of three related dimensions; intimate loneliness, relational loneliness and collective loneliness (Hawkley et al., 2005; Hawkley et al., 2008; Weiss, 1973). These dimensions match a person's surroundings; intimate space, social space and public space. The intimate loneliness or emotional loneliness refers to the absence of a meaningful person. A person one can rely on for emotional support, mutual assistance and who affirms one's value (Cacioppo et al., 2008; Dunbar, 2014). The relational loneliness or social loneliness refers to the perceived absence of highly valued friendships or family connections. Such social groups of friends can include 15-50 people providing support to each other (Dunbar, 2014; Weiss, 1973). Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that it is not the quantity of friends, but the quality of friends that counts (Hawkley et al., 2008). The collective loneliness refers to a person's valued social identities and social network where a person can connect to others in a public space (Hawkley et al., 2005; Weiss, 1973). Joining voluntary groups to which individuals belong is of great importance to minimize the collective loneliness. Statistics showed that the more voluntary associations to which people belonged, the lower their collective loneliness (Hawkley et al., 2005).

Loneliness can contribute as a great risk factor for psychosocial diagnoses, such as depression, alcoholism, suicidal thoughts, aggression and social anxiety. Additional risk factors for physical dysfunctions are cognitive decline, increased vascular resistance, obesity, elevated blood pressure, decreased sleep rhythm and diminished immunity (Cacioppo et al., 2015). A different study found a negative correlation between loneliness and cognitive functions, suggesting that a greater feeling of loneliness is associated with lower cognitive function (Boss, Kang & Branson, 2015).

Therefore, our stipulative definition for loneliness is a distressing experience that occurs when an individual's social relationship feels inadequate in quantity or quality (Hawkley, 2015). As this feeling is experienced differently by each individual, the feeling is subjective. In the sections of archaic and modern theories we discuss theories that can help reinforce our understanding of loneliness which will serve as building blocks for recommendations on potentially successful community initiatives. Furthermore, the theory of success is included to help identify which aspects of an initiative add to its effectiveness.

Archaic Theories

The first theory produced on loneliness was "attachment theory", developed by John Bowlby during the mid-20th century (Bowlby, 1969; McLeod, 2017). This theory emphasizes that propensity for loneliness is directly linked to the relationship between caregiver and infant. The less strong this connection is the less they are equipped to handle other relationship dynamics. This results in these individuals being rejected by peers and eventually distrusting

individuals, ultimately leading to a positive feedback loop feeding the vicious cycle (Fraley, 2018).

Similar to hunger and thirst, loneliness is regarded as a basic aversive state and prompts behavioural change to satisfy the psychological “itch” which influences survivability (Cacioppo et al, 2013). A theory that can explain this is Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (figure 1) (McLeod, 2007). This hierarchy portrays that needs lower on the pyramid must be satisfied before higher needs can be attended to. In the case of loneliness (social isolation) it is a very archaic feeling that causes increased vigilance/perception of danger and heightens feelings for vulnerability while in tandem promoting the desire to reconnect (Hawkley et al., 2010; McLeod, 2007). Safety is the second most important hierarchical need, after food and water, and one way to feel safe is to have social cohesion. This has allowed us to develop into an ultra-sociable animal (Tomasello, 2014). In other words, this “itch” of loneliness historically promoted “social trust, cohesiveness and collective action” (Schmidt, 1989, 314-322; Cacioppo et al., 2013).

The importance of this statement is two-fold. Firstly, it enhances our understanding of loneliness on a biological level. Secondly, the explanation of the evolutionary importance allows researchers to come up with better solutions at a more primal level, i.e to satiate the “itch” or need (Cacioppo et al., 2013). In our research project this is applicable as well. Firstly, it illustrates that producing a feeling of social cohesion is a factor influencing loneliness. Secondly, the theory juxtaposes the feeling of increased vigilance with the longing to reconnect which can illustrate a major barrier in helping those that feel the loneliest (Cacioppo et al, 2018). In addition, one of the major critics on the hierarchy of needs is that in a modern society all needs require a social connection to be fulfilled (Fallatah & Syed, 2017). Although this is criticism to the theory of Maslow it reinforces our concept that social connection is a major need.

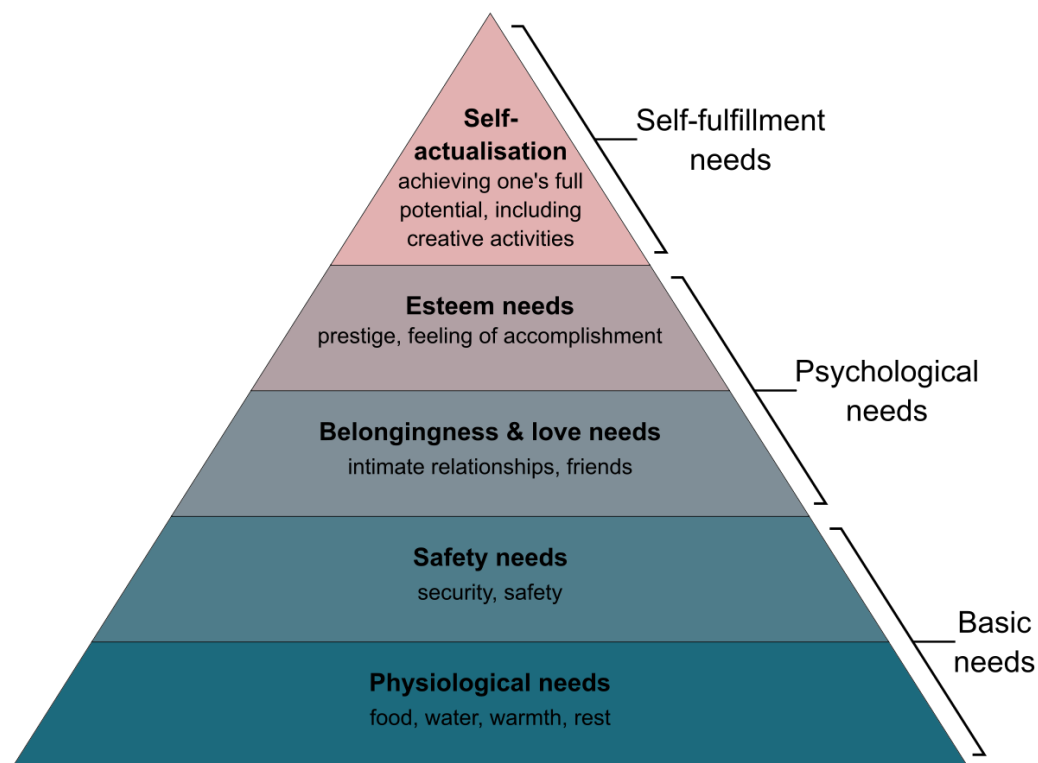


Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (McLeod, 2007).

Modern Theories

A systematic review by Lim, Gleeson, Alvarez-Jimenez, & Penn (2018) tried to conceptualize the relationship between loneliness and related psychological and social factors from individuals suffering from psychosis. This is an important model for our research because other than psychosis it focuses on concepts that influence loneliness and gives good avenues for investigation.

This model attempts to use these findings as a method to inform interventions to target loneliness within this group. From here they found five factors that influence loneliness; the first being mental health which within their conceptual model includes depression and anxiety which are both risk factors for loneliness (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Cacioppo et al., 2010).

Secondly, social support indicators which are categorized in two groups, one being structural groups, which refers to connections within the individuals' social network. For example, this could include the network size, marital status as well as living arrangements (Mondesir et al., 2018). The second part of this is functional social support, usually this is conceptualized as the "perception that support resources, such as material aid, emotional support, companionship or information, would be available from one's social network if needed" (Gallo et al., 2014; Lakey, & Cohen, 2000).

Well-being factors such as quality of life and recovery were major factors that influenced loneliness in relation to psychosis patients. The study theorized that the reduction in loneliness occurred through the increasing recovery from psychosis due to an improvement in quality of life (Lim et al., 2017).

Societal perceptions, such as internalized stigma (applying stigma to themselves) and perceived discrimination (feel like they are being discriminated) of people suffering from psychosis was also a factor found that created a feeling of loneliness. This is often caused due to the internalized stigma and perceived discrimination having impacts on self-esteem, depression, and support seeking behaviours (Chrostek, Grygiel, Anczewska, Wciórka, & Świtaj, 2016; Świtaj et al., 2014, 2015). Furthermore, these feelings cause individuals to remove themselves from social activities, which allows them to avoid those feelings of shame or inadequacy (Amering & Schmolke, 2009). Although in this theory it is focused on psychosis the concept of internalized stigma is still represented within the lonely population as discussed by Rokach (1997).

Lastly, self-constructs such as self-esteem and self-efficacy (believing in your own capability) were important concepts in relation to psychosis and loneliness. However, for our research self-esteem is a more useful concept to investigate as research has shown that low self-esteem can increase loneliness directly and indirectly (Chrostek et al., 2016; Switaj et al., 2015).

Although these five factors were found for people suffering from psychosis it is still a valid conceptual model to use in the overarching concept of loneliness in the population of New West. In addition, the factors described can all be affected by the corona epidemic.

Integration of Archaic theories and Modern theories

Although the archaic theories and the modern theories seem very disconnected there is some overlap. Identifying and integrating these concepts will improve the validity of our conceptual framework and allow for profound and knowledgeable connections to be made. The basic needs and psychological needs named in the Hierarchy of Needs (figure 1) are in connection with three of the factors listed in the modern theory of Lim et al., 2018.

The social support concept, from Lim et al. 2018, is connected with the need for safety and the need for belongingness and love (figure 1). The connections within social groups increase the feeling of belonging, nevertheless without a group where someone belongs the feeling of safety can be suppressed. The power of belonging among functional social support, strengthens the emotional support of one individual, which contributes to the feeling of safety.

The self-construct and social perceptions are both in line with the need for esteem, a psychological need (figure 1). Self-constructed self-esteem is directly connected to the need for esteem, where a person's establishments are in line with the feeling of accomplishment. Social perceptions such as internalized stigma and perceived discrimination can give individuals the feeling of being useless. This feeling of being useless can quell the feeling and need to accomplish and therefore create self-esteem.

From what we have discussed it is clear that integrating the two theories will allow for a more thorough understanding of our conceptual framework. This will then allow the conclusions drawn to be more concise and knowledgeable.

Theory on success

A topic that should also be discussed is the theoretical framework on success. For this project the stipulative definition for success is when there is a reduction in levels of loneliness in Amsterdam New West. One theory that can help in understanding is the Four Keys by Wandersman (2009). There are four stages; theory, implementation, evaluation, and resource/system support that are key to a successful community initiative. The first part; more broadly called theory of change is a frameworking method to ensure success. It focuses on what the long term goal is and then works back retrospectively and makes assumptions on intermediate preconditions in the medium- and short term. This will eventually lead to the long term goal. This is aided by proper theories on loneliness that was mentioned above (Anderson & Harris, 2005).

Furthermore, implementation, described by Fixsen et al (2005), is a "specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions". For community initiatives to be successful there must be experienced and trained personnel, as well as enough resources.

In addition, the original theory from the first four keys must be followed with fidelity. This alignment is useful in our research as it gives us a framework to review the success of a community initiative by reviewing through qualitative means (interviewing personnel) as well as quantitative by determining the resource allocation.

Additionally, evaluation is key to a successful community initiative as it allows for the collecting, analyzing, and interpreting of data. Following the strengths and weaknesses of a particular project can be communicated which allows for programs to be continued, improved, removed or expanded. However, sometimes the weakness lies within the evaluation instrument. Therefore triangulation (multiple instruments evaluating different aspects) should be done. Furthermore, staff and personnel may have negative feelings towards the evaluation process and thus not cooperate (Daniels, & O'Neil, 1979; Fetterman et al., 1996). This is again important to our research project in two ways; firstly, it solidifies the idea that multiple evaluation methods should be used to determine efficacy/success. Secondly, the evaluators must be seen as an in-group and not an out-group which will increase cooperation.

The last key to success is resource/system support which discusses the need for a supporting organisation as well as infrastructure (leadership, motivation). However, it is beyond the scope of this research topic to comment on organisational behaviour as well as infrastructure characteristics.

Conceptual Framework

There are many factors that can play a role when attempting to reduce loneliness in Amsterdam New West during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chosen model to assert the reduction of loneliness (figure 2) was based on the model by Lim et al. (2017). As previously mentioned, this model originally focuses on the interactions between loneliness in psychosis patients and mental health, social support, societal perception, self-construct, and well-being. Furthermore, in order to bring the model more into the context in question, a sphere was added to symbolize the COVID-19 pandemic surrounding loneliness and the four themes previously mentioned (figure 2). The community initiatives included in our study when it focused on one of the themes in this conceptual framework, as these themes have a direct influence on the feeling of loneliness.

This model was chosen because of its multilateral scope when looking at the reduction of loneliness in a community setting. The key point of this model holds that when trying to reduce loneliness, in this case in a community setting during a pandemic, it is important to take in multiple factors into consideration when trying to improve or come up with new community initiatives when dealing with loneliness.

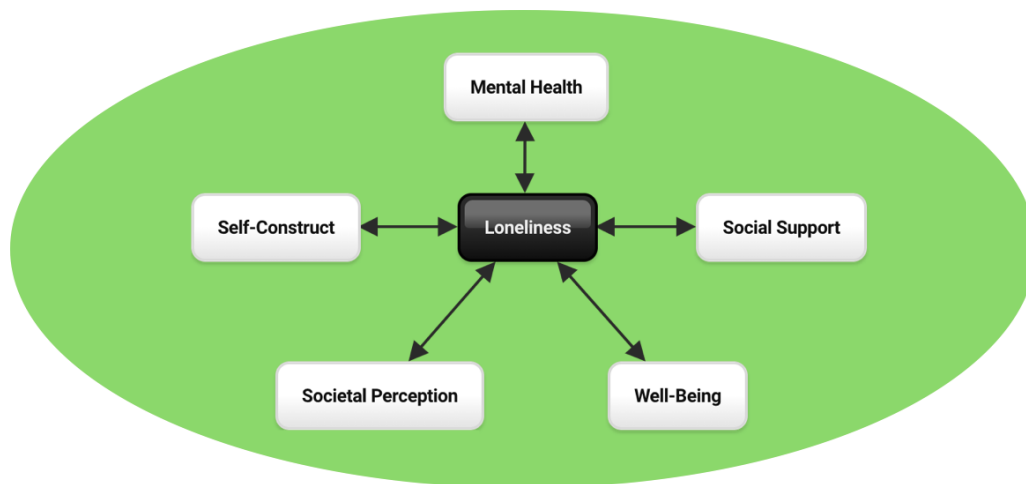


Figure 2: The loneliness model based on the original model by Lim et al. (2017). This model encompasses all of the original themes (mental health, social support, societal perception, self-construct and well-being) which are encompassed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (green).

Social Support

As previously mentioned, social support can be distinguished in structural and functional social support. A high social support level of an individual can play a key factor in reducing the feelings of loneliness, meaning when an individual perceives both satisfied levels of structural and functional social support the feelings of loneliness decrease. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak the social interaction with friends and family was minimized, which could lead to decreased social support and thus an increase in the feelings of loneliness. Individuals that already engaged in social activities and initiatives could not engage during the pandemic. Nevertheless, new initiatives emerged that attempted to increase social support. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic 'Buurtcamping Sloterpark' organised an online bingo event to

enhance the social cohesion in Amsterdam New West ("Initiatief | Wij Amsterdam", n.d.). Hereby, it was possible for people to engage in a social event and have social interactions, but with respect to the new corona measures. This and several other initiatives undertaken during the pandemic tried to strengthen the social support and minimize the feeling of loneliness.

Self-construct

Self-construct can also play a major role in someone's perception of loneliness and can be divided in two categories, namely: self-esteem and self-efficacy. When someone's self-construct is low, he or she may not engage in social gatherings and initiatives provided by initiative takers. This can lead to a vicious cycle, due to the fact that somebody does not engage because of a low self-construct, but eventually ends up increasing the feelings of loneliness by not going to the initiatives.

During the COVID-19 pandemic the self-construct of individuals could decrease due to the fact that several initiatives, for example initiatives where someone felt comfortable with, were cancelled. Someone with a low self-construct might not sign in into new initiatives provided, because of the social barrier that some people might find difficult to break through.

Societal Perception

As previously mentioned, societal perception, in this model, consists of internalized stigma and perceived discrimination (Lim, Gleeson, Alvarez-Jimenez, & Penn, 2018). When looking at societal perception in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, feelings of loneliness can potentially be exacerbated (Killgore, Taylor, Cloonan, & Daley, 2020) (figure 2). People who feel lonely may already feel stigmatized if they admit their feelings in order to find help. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, self-isolation and social distancing measures may actually increase feelings of loneliness. This, in turn, could lead to even higher perception of internalized stigma, which could ultimately impede the reduction of loneliness. Furthermore, this impediment could bring someone into a downward spiral (Killgore et al., 2020). Alongside stigma, perceived discrimination has also shown to increase feelings of loneliness (Killgore et al., 2020; Świtaj et al., 2015). This can either occur directly or indirectly by having a negative impact on self-esteem, depression, and support seeking (Świtaj et al., 2015).

If negative societal perceptions can be prevented in the community of Amsterdam New West during the COVID-19 pandemic, then a reduction of loneliness could be obtainable (Lim et al., 2018). This could potentially be done through community initiatives that tackle these negative societal perceptions.

Mental Health

When addressing mental health, depression was the most consistently measured mental health symptom in reviewed studies. This is probable seeing that depression has been found to be a risk factor for loneliness, this could be seen in figure 2 (Lim et al., 2018). Furthermore, loneliness has also been associated with many negative mental health outcomes such as anxiety, suicidal ideation, reduced positive emotions and poor sleep quality (Beutel et al., 2017). Now looking at mental health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sensation of loneliness can possibly intensify. According to a study done by Stavridou et al. (2020), extreme worrying, irritability, being homebound, and fear of COVID-19 infection and transmission are associated with mild to severe anxiety symptoms during the COVID-19 epidemic. Furthermore, Isolation could be a risk factor for decline in mental health. This includes depressive and anxiety symptoms, distress, fear, post-traumatic stress, and insomnia (Stavridou et al., 2020).

Well-Being

Well-being within the conceptual framework relates to quality of life and recovery (Lim et al, 2018). Although quality of life often has its own conceptual framework (Round et al, 2013) we will only be utilizing a select number of concepts. Namely, freedom, independence, and

physical health as these have been of paramount importance during the COVID-19 outbreak. The difference between the first two terms is that independence relates to the internal ability of doing something without depending on others. While freedom is affected by external circumstances (COVID-19 outbreak) ("Difference between freedom, independence, Liberty - PATHLEGAL", 2017). This directly relates to the context of COVID-19 where freedoms that are a part of our society were bounded as a method to limit virus transmission (Atalan, 2020).

Furthermore, physical health is a concept that does not only relate to the absence of disease but also to activity ("Meaningful life - Physical health", 2019). This is again related to our context as many people were not able to participate in their normal activities. Although mental health is often included in quality of life it will not be included here as it is already discussed as a stand-alone concept above. Furthermore, recovery will be removed from our conceptual framework as we are not focusing on the recovery from a specific disease, which was the case in the original conceptual framework (psychosis).

Sub questions derived from conceptual framework

Based on the information that was previously mentioned, it is clear to see that the pandemic has an exacerbating effect on the sensation of loneliness. Furthermore, this concept gives further insight on which factors to address when looking at community initiatives to reduce loneliness and social isolation in Amsterdam New West. For example, checking up with your neighbours especially if they are suffering from mental health problems and making sure they get the professional help they need if they cannot achieve that on their own.

From the previously mentioned theoretical and conceptual frameworks, we were able to have more clarity into the issue of loneliness in the community of Amsterdam New West. These theories and concepts give us avenues that can be pursued during interviews. As well as providing enough information to develop sub-questions regarding the main research questions.

- How has COVID-19 affected the efficacy of community initiatives tackling loneliness?
- How do community initiatives build-up a theoretical framework when designing activities tackling loneliness?
- How do community initiatives apply a theoretical framework in the implementation process?
- How do community initiatives evaluate their activities?
- How do community initiatives influence mental health when tackling loneliness?
- How do community initiatives influence social support when tackling loneliness?
- How do community initiatives influence societal perception when tackling loneliness?
- How do community initiatives influence self-construct when tackling loneliness?
- How do community initiatives influence well-being when tackling loneliness?

Methodology

This section describes the methodology chosen in order to answer the main question of this research. The importance of this research was to gain insight into how effectively initiatives were during the COVID-19 pandemic to tackle loneliness. In order to gain this insight a qualitative design was chosen for this study because we were interested in the subjective views of successful aspects of existing/new community initiatives. To do so, twelve semi-structured interviews were performed, as this approach allows disadvantaged groups to be noticed (Mertens, 2002). These semi-structured interviews were held with executors of community initiatives focused on loneliness in or around Amsterdam New West but not outside of Amsterdam.

The gathered information, however, remains specifically aimed at Amsterdam New West. These semi-structured interviews were done to gain in-depth insight into their perception on what makes an initiative successful and what aspects specifically are important to achieve this. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because it allows the researcher more freedom to 'probe' for more detailed responses where the respondent is asked to further expand on their answer. Furthermore, such probing also may allow the interview to move into a new direction which, while not initially considered as part of the interview, helps towards meeting the research objectives. However, one limitation that follows semi-structured interviews is that it is slow and time-consuming to capture and analyze data. This is especially the case when saturation is not reached early on in the data collection process.

Aim

By using a semi-structured interview, we aimed to explore and establish a better understanding of successful aspects of existing/new community initiatives through interviews. This guided us to make recommendations to the Knowledge Alliance Loneliness on how community initiatives can tackle loneliness.

Unit of analysis

The unit of analysis (target population) of the research consisted of executors of the community initiatives in or around Amsterdam New West. Executors, in this context, are people who conduct and perform initiatives that aid in reducing loneliness. This implies that they are closely related with participants of the initiatives in question that experience loneliness which could provide a multilateral scope of the topic in question.

Sampling strategy

Participants for this portion of this research, which are the executors of community initiatives, were recruited through purposive sampling. This was to ensure that we could explore aspects of community initiatives specifically focused on loneliness in Amsterdam New West. To recruit the executors, different organizations and individuals were targeted and visited that contain initiatives that tackle loneliness in or around Amsterdam New West, such as "Huis van de Wijk" and "SAAAM". The organizations found were directly contacted telephonically or indirectly via email. Lastly, participants were also approached using the snowball method where active executors who have shown interest in this research provided recommendations. In order to be eligible, participants must have been working or volunteering at a community initiative focused on tackling loneliness in or around Amsterdam New West. Participants that worked or volunteered in community initiatives focused on topics other than loneliness and that are in or around Amsterdam New West were excluded from this study. This also accounts for initiatives outside of Amsterdam.

Data collection

A semi-structured interview guide was utilized to aid in conducting the interviews. This guide included the topics: mental health, social support, well-being, societal perception, and self-constructs, and success of (aspects of) the initiative in question. All of these topics are in connection with loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of twelve interviews were conducted, seeing that this amount could approximate data saturation. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The majority of these interviews were performed online through ZOOM. Some interviews were performed in person, with attention given to the measures at that time regarding safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, in order to ensure internal validity, accuracy, and credibility for this research member checks were performed. These were done during the interviews through the building of rapport and through receiving clarification from the interviewees on summaries of the provided data.

Data analysis

To analyse the interviews both inductive and deductive content analysis were used. This was to ensure that the coding of the data was still related to the conceptual model of the research but also provide opportunity for emerging themes to arise during the analytical process. A thematic analysis of the data was performed in order to explore patterns of successful (aspects of) community initiatives aimed at reducing loneliness. The themes that arose from coding the transcripts were highlighted, labelled and, was later on, compared across the research group. This was done to further increase reliability and trustworthiness, and ultimately reach consensus on the themes that emerged. Regarding the transcripts of the conducted interviews, these were all individually read and cross-case analysed by researchers working on this study. By doing this we can establish researcher triangulation.

Operationalization

The main themes presented in the conceptual framework (mental health, social support, well-being, societal perception and self-construct) were also utilized for the coding of the transcribed interviews. Mental health was further subdivided into depression and anxiety. Depression was seen as having feelings of despondency and dejection while anxiety was seen as feeling tension, worried thoughts, or possible physiological changes. Similarly, social support was subdivided into functional support and structural support. Functional support encompassed the perception that resources would be available from one's social network if this is needed, and social support was defined as the amount and types of connections an individual might have in their social network. Regarding well-being, this was also subdivided further into freedom, independence, physical health and sense of belonging. Freedom entails the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants in this context it is seen as being allowed to meet up with as many people as the individual desires. Independence was defined as a relation to the internal ability of doing something without depending on others. Physical health was defined as the balance of physical activity, nutrition and mental well-being to keep your body in top condition. This was related to our context as many people were not able to participate in their normal activities. Lastly, sense of belonging was defined as a human need, acceptance as a member or part, most important in seeing value in life. Furthermore, societal perception was subdivided into internalised stigma and perceived discrimination. Regarding internalised stigma, this was defined as people who feel lonely themselves affirming loneliness stereotypes on themselves. Perceived discrimination was seen as how people who feel lonely perceive being mistreated from others. Moreover, self-construct was subdivided into self-esteem, self-efficacy and attitude. Self-esteem was defined as an individual's subjective evaluation of their own worth. Furthermore, self-efficacy was defined as a personal judgment of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations.

Attitude was defined as manner, disposition, feeling, position, with regard to a person. Lastly, COVID-19 was also a theme which was subdivided into social distancing and isolation. Social distancing was referred to as maintaining physical distance between people while isolation was defined as the process of or the fact that someone isolating themselves.

Ethical considerations

All information provided during the interviews was kept undisclosed and confidential throughout the whole process of this research. For the privacy of the participants the recordings were deleted after completion of the study. To ensure clarity, the written transcripts will be securely kept. The data is owned by the VU University of Amsterdam and shared with the Knowledge Alliance Loneliness. Participants also received a copy of the final report. Before each interview every participant signed an informed consent form, which explained the goal of our study briefly, what the interview was based on, and their right to withdraw from the study at any given moment. Furthermore, we were counselled by the Scientific and Ethical Review Board (VCWE) of the VU University of Amsterdam for any ethical issues that may have arisen during the research.

Results

This research explored the successful aspects of community initiatives on reducing loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they can be applied to cope with loneliness in Amsterdam New West in order to give recommendations to the Knowledge Alliance Loneliness.

In this chapter, the results of the data analysis of the conducted interviews will be presented to provide a more in-depth understanding on the successful aspects of community initiatives on reducing loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first section demonstrates the characteristics of the study population. In the second section, the sub questions are answered using the results.

A deductive coding guide was primarily used and each subsequent interview allowed for an inductive open coding approach to fill in any gaps that were not covered by our coding guide delineated from the conceptual framework. This allowed for two emerging codes, technology and collaboration, to be integrated into the research producing a more holistic view on how community initiatives cope with loneliness. From the coding and linking of categories and subcategories 3 overarching themes emerged, namely resilience, focus of the initiatives and benefits of the initiatives. These themes are subdivided into different categories. The first theme tackling loneliness, is subdivided into social support, empowerment, sense of belonging and mental health. The second theme, the focus of initiatives, is divided in theory and evaluation. The third theme, resilience, is divided into creativity/flexibility, technology, collaboration and accessibility.

Sample Characteristics

In this study, 12 executors of community initiatives in or around Amsterdam New West were interviewed. These 12 interviews came from a total of 10 organizations in which multiple perspectives between and within organization were sought for. This was done to obtain an overview of their perspectives of successful aspects and barriers of community initiatives aimed at reducing loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide recommendations to the Knowledge Alliance Loneliness. A community initiative is defined as a network of individuals and partner organizations committed to better the welfare and health within a community ("US Legal, I", n.d.). These organizations are underlying or specifically aimed at reducing loneliness. The community initiatives were executed in various ways, such as through movement activities, but also through meetings or learning moments. The organizations that did their initiatives through movement were: Stichting Dance Connects, Gezond Natuur Wandelen and Golden Sports. In addition, the organizations which executed their initiatives via meetings were: Vooruit, Stichting Present & Nederlandse Tuinenstichting and SAAAM. Lastly, the organizations in which their initiatives had learning moments were: Hart van Osdorp, Combiwel, Movisie and WijkLeerbedrijf. An overview of the interviewees can be found in table 1 where it further states their function and which district their initiative is tackling. Further description on each organization can be found under annex 2.

Table 1. An overview of the interviewees.

Interview #	Organization	District	Function of interviewee
1	Combiwel	Amsterdam New West (Osdorp, t Blommetje)	Community worker
2	Combiwel	Amsterdam New West (Osdorp, 't Blommetje)	GGZ coach
3	Hart van Osdorp/ Combiwel	Amsterdam New West (Osdorp)	Wellness coach
4	Vooruit	Amsterdam New West (Slotermeer-West)	District coordinator
5	Vooruit	Amsterdam New West (Osdorp de Wildemanbuurt)	District coordinator
6	Movisie	Amsterdam	Researcher and advisor
7	WijkLeerbedrijf	Amsterdam New West	Senior advisor
8	SAAAM	Amsterdam New West	Founder/Project Coordinator
9	Golden Sports	Across The Netherlands	Program Manager
10	Gezond Natuur Wandelen	Across The Netherlands	Program Manager
11	Stichting Present & Nederlandse Tuinenstichting	Amsterdam	Project coordinator
12	Stichting Dance Connects	Amsterdam West, Oost en Centrum	Founder/Artistic director

Successfulness of community initiatives

1. Tackling loneliness

An overarching theme that emerged from the collected data is how initiatives help in tackling loneliness. This can be divided into social support, empowerment and sense of belonging. The essence of this overarching theme is which aspects should be included in an initiative in order to be successful.

1.1. Social support

In the functional support, the focus of most of the initiatives was to develop a wider network for the participants, regarding the aim to increase social support to help reduce their feelings of loneliness. Movisie suggested that almost all the initiatives organized group activities and were more focused on the prevention of social loneliness. Moreover, in the interview with the initiative taker of Combiwel & Hart van Osdorp, it was remarked that participants with emotional loneliness needed more individual attention and connection with the volunteers, while the

participants with social loneliness found it more useful to meet in a group setting to create more bonding with all of the participants (Hart van Osdorp, Combiwel). Also, it was highlighted by Combiwel & Hart van Osdorp that the network created by the initiatives was of great value during the COVID-19 pandemic, because people were more dependent on the network they created by keeping contact with the help of technology (GoldenSports, Hart van Osdorp, Combiwel).

Continuity of the initiatives was another important aspect that came from the interviews. Some organisations (Hart van Osdorp, Combiwel, Vooruit- Osdorp de Wildemanbuurt) achieved continuity by doing their activities at the same place and time to create a stable environment. Furthermore, Movisie suggested that continuity can help participants structure their day.

Moreover, Combiwel and Movisie stated that initiatives were more successful if the initiatives were durable. For the structural support, continuity of initiatives is consolidated when it contributes to the forming of psychosocial contacts. The forming of psychosocial contacts leads to the initiative appearing attractive to participants and ultimately receiving continuous attention.

The elderly was really used to having structured activities in a week, suddenly that changed to having no activities. They really missed that.” (I01, Combiwel)

1.2. Empowerment

6 out of 12 interviews emphasised the importance of empowerment as a key aspect in the successfulness of reducing loneliness. Self-worth can also be distinguished as another subcategory of empowerment. Community initiatives that lead to increased feelings of self-worth can therefore empower participants, which increases their self-esteem. The interview with Sociaal Tuinieren and Vooruit stated that not only participants but also volunteers get something out of the initiative, while it can benefit both parties and therefore lead to a greater sense of empowerment. This was also highlighted in the interview with WijkLeerbedrijf in Amsterdam New West where the participants are motivated to get a role in their life. This providence of a goal also stimulates the self-efficiency of a person. To illustrate this, a participant can help an elderly neighborhood resident with groceries, while the neighbourhood resident gives the participant language courses. This eventually leads to a greater empowerment of both parties and increases the social cohesion in neighborhoods. *Over the years we developed ourselves to the importance of reciprocity. Therefore, not only offering the people help, but also in asking the people to give something in return as their services. But never money, never! We were offered this before, but never turned to it, but yes reciprocity. Because if you are reciprocal, you show that your equal to all.” (I11, Sociaal Tuinieren)*

The interview with ‘Dans voor de Deur’ also emphasised that it is of great importance to involve participants and give them a role in the process, therefore leading to an increase in empowerment. Additionally, the interview with GoldenSports showed that it is actually not about the initiative that is organized, but about connecting people together and therefore creating a greater sense of belonging and strengthening the empowerment among members. Improving this aspect can indirectly improve the ability of the initiative to tackle loneliness. *Once people start joining an activity or a weekly scheduled dance class, then the first question that I ask people is ‘What kind of music do you love?’ or ‘What do you like?’.” (I12, ‘Dans voor de Deur’)*

Another aspect is independence and can be defined as the internal ability of doing something without depending on others. The interviews showed that the range of self-reliance differs per participant. On one hand, initiators tried to increase self-reliance by, for example, giving zoom instructions, so that social contacts could be maintained. However, on the other hand, some people stayed more inside because of restrictions or anxieties, which made them more dependent on others to receive for example their groceries.

1.3. Sense of belonging

The sense of belonging is formed when an individual is able to identify themselves with an identity with which they feel an emotional belonging and with which they are able to categorize themselves. When the sense of belonging is increased, the feeling of loneliness is reduced. An example is the WijkLeerbedrijf, who argued that it is crucial to give participants a goal in such a manner that participants feel involved. Initiatives really need to do something with the aim of helping other people to increase the feeling of belonging which in turn lessens feelings of loneliness. In the WijkLeerbedrijf this is performed with mutual help of the participants and the resident. The participants give the residents that feel lonely more attention and help in for example households. To illustrate this, neighborhood residents give language lessons to participants and therefore feel a greater sense of belonging. This leads to an increase in the feeling of being needed and valuable. Another important aspect of the sense of belonging is feeling equal. This was visible in the interview of “Sociaal Tuinieren”, where they improved the gardens of people who are not able to do so themselves. With this work they have an as beautiful garden as the others in the neighborhood. Because of this they feel less left out and feel more connected to the neighborhood.

In the organization GoldenSports, they have a system where they can see who has not turned up for the lessons in a while. This system was set up before the pandemic and had a large impact on their company as it strengthened the sense of belonging for the participants. By calling them they can check if everything is going well or if there are any problems where they can help. Other organizations find it difficult to keep track of this. Without this oversight it is difficult to see who needs help and so negatively impact the sense of belonging of the participants.

Moreover, it is important to find an initiative that suits the needs of the participant and their feelings of loneliness. This eventually helps people to participate longer in an activity, with longer participation a true connection can be formed. In doing so both structural and functional support are promoted. Sometimes participants find it easier to stick with people of the same nationality, where the feeling of belonging is also enhanced. However, in other interviews it can be seen that the social groups are multicultural, as is the case in Dans voor de Deur.

From the interviews it was seen that physical encounter is of importance when reducing loneliness as contact via technological platforms where not sufficient. In the pandemic this physical encounter was more difficult due to the restrictions. Yet, Vooruit Slotermeer, tried to maintain as much contact as possible online and offline. They called and wrote to people who felt lonely and also delivered groceries and that was the moment where they stayed and had a small interaction. Those interactions, even if they are short, are of great importance to people that feel lonely as they feel wanted and thus feel a sense of belonging. Ultimately, the key points necessary to increase a sense of belonging are providing a goal, recognizing their actions, connecting with them and making them feel equal. Thus, improving the sense of belonging through various mechanisms can have positive off-target effects for addressing loneliness.

The volunteers that performed deliveries actually all made some time to have a conversation with the people. As Lisa, one of them who helped make bread every morning, told us that she felt a true connection with some of the participants. That you can appeal to them by their first name and that some people let them come on purpose just to have conversation.” (104, Vooruit Slotermeer)

1.4. Mental health

Additionally, the sense of belonging is not the only thing that is connected to loneliness. As the mental health itself also has a great impact. However, most of the initiatives did not focus on tackling mental health. Most of the data showed that anxiety has increased among participants during the pandemic. There was uncertainty and panic among participants that often led to a decrease in participation at initiatives. Many people lost courage, were anxious and preferred to stay at home, for example because they belong to a high-risk group. Some elderly people became angry or had developed more psychological problems. The lack of

social contacts can exacerbate depression and anxiety due to the continuous increased timeframe of social distancing caused by the pandemic.

Uncertainty was an aspect that came forward as relevant. The interview with 'WijkLeerbedrijf' showed that people with a non-western background often need to be guided in the distinguishment of real news from fake news, concerning the measure taken during COVID-19 pandemic. However, having uncertainties was not limited to the non-western population, as nobody really knew how the situation was going to develop. Anxiety about the future and health were additional to the already existing anxieties of the people and how to cope with the issue is ambiguous.

2. Focus of the initiatives

A second overarching theme that emerged from the collected data is the focus of the initiatives, with emphasis on loneliness. This focus of the initiatives can be divided into the sub-themes of theory, and evaluation. Critical to this theme is how the objective of the initiatives align with their outcomes and what they do to ensure this alignment.

2.1. Theory

The initiatives included in this study stated different goals while all linked to loneliness in a certain way. Some specifically mentioned loneliness in the aim of the initiatives, while others stated that they aimed to connect people, with the underlying objective to diminish loneliness. There was also a difference in how the initiatives formed their objectives, with some starting from their own research and interest and some adjusting it to what they perceive their participants need.

It was suggested by Movisie that initiatives oftentimes do not achieve what they set out to do. This has to do with either their activities not matching their aim and/or difficulties in reaching their target group. Most initiatives organize group activities through which they offer their participants social support and a sense of belonging, which Movisie suggests can be very helpful in preventing loneliness. However, Movisie states that for feelings of loneliness to decrease or de-intensify in people who already feel considerably lonely, a more individualistic approach is needed, which not all initiatives can deliver. Combiwel/Huis van Osdorp differentiates their activities based on what their participants need. They focus on either an individual or collective approach, adjusting to how the participant experiences loneliness.

In some interviews, it was noted that initiatives struggle with the aim to reduce loneliness, because reaching people who actually experience loneliness can be difficult, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic since many people were more anxious by the situation. Some organisations promote their initiatives by handing out flyers, while other initiative takers were mainly talking to the people in the neighborhood about their activities. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the resident from the neighbourhood to participate in the activities. Sometimes, it will take some time to make people participate in the initiatives, but this does not signify that it could not become a successful initiative. While reaching the target audience many organisations do not mention the term loneliness specifically as participants might preferably not like to label themselves as lonely if they experience it that way. In addition, as indicated earlier, the aim of the initiatives can also be preventing loneliness, appealing to people who do not experience loneliness yet.

2.2. Evaluation

In most of the interviews it was indicated that initiatives made use of evaluations during their activities. Some initiatives barely performed any evaluations. Variations existed in the way evaluations were performed. Goldensport, SAAAM, and Gezond Natuur Wandelen stated that an important way to see if a program has been successful is by evaluating and letting participants decide for themselves whether a program has been helpful or not. This has a positive effect on the implementation of the initiatives. Participants are also asked to not only evaluate the activities but also their feelings of loneliness. At WijkLeerBedrijf, they evaluated

feelings of loneliness among participants using the De Jong Gierveld Rasch-Type Loneliness Scale (Jong-Gierveld, 1985).

Some initiatives had a low frequency of evaluations. 't Blommetje suggested that their lack of evaluation is a strong point of improvement. According to them, lack of evaluation played a role in not getting enough collaborations. Collaborators need to recognize the strengths and weaknesses within their own efforts. When these are not clear enough, collaborators will be reluctant to provide any form of financial, resourceful, or knowledgeable support, as mentioned earlier.

It was also raised by Movisie that if initiatives evaluate, they often do not make adjustments according to the received feedback. An offered explanation was that in contrast to an organisation where people are paid to reach a certain goal, for community initiatives it is key that the people who work there function well as a group and enjoy working there since it is voluntary. A too rational mindset towards goals and achievements can lead to tension and frustrations in the informal setting of a community initiative. According to Movisie, it can be hard for these initiatives to find the right balance between good group dynamics and achieving the aim of reducing or preventing loneliness by implementing lessons drawn from evaluations. *I think that many initiatives do not or not often evaluate. I think this is a point for improvement. The evaluation is a part that an organization can easily do themselves, you don't need to hire a research team to come in and evaluate. But I think that when initiatives do evaluate, often they do not draw lessons from it" (106, Movisie)*

The effectiveness of the evaluation is often hindered by limitations in theory of loneliness. There is no standard definition and also not a standard evaluation procedure of loneliness. Because of this, every initiative does this in their own manner.

3. Resilience of the initiative

When comparing all the executed interviews with each other resilience is an overarching theme that emerged in a number of these interviews through smaller themes. These subthemes are technology, collaboration, accessibility, and creativity/flexibility. The essence of this overarching theme is that regardless of external factors, such as COVID-19, the initiative is able to operate and/or start up again quicker comparatively to other initiatives. As the aim of the community initiatives are often linked to reducing or preventing loneliness, the organisations wanted to proceed their initiatives in a way that allowed people to still keep in contact with each other. Moreover, social support and a sense of belonging has a positive impact on the prevention or reduction of loneliness.

3.1. Creativity/flexibility

During moments of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, initiatives require a certain level of creativity and flexibility to cope with the situation so they can continue tackling loneliness. Being creative and flexible can aid in developing alternatives for the activities of initiatives or even develop new initiatives based on the situation in context, like with Dance Connects. The founder of Dance Connects could not imagine people being alone in their homes during this pandemic without any type of distraction. Because of this, they developed and executed the idea to give dance performances outside in public even if they were not certain that this would work. They simply felt the need and obligation to do something during the COVID-19 lockdown and wanted to do something about it.

When it comes to adapting activities and developing alternatives to help tackle loneliness, all the initiatives interviewed were pressured to do so with their activities due to the pandemic. Whether this be a reduction in size of participants or volunteers, like in Gezond Natuur Wandelen and Sociaal Tuinieren, or taking social distancing into account, like in the case of Huis van de wijk 't Blommetje van Combiwel, every single initiative challenged themselves to think creatively to ensure that their activities could continue operating regardless of the restrictions set at the time. This had an impact on the effectiveness of certain aspects of the activities. Sociaal Tuinieren, for example, could not fully perform their activities surrounding gardening, but they ensured that the social aspect of their initiative remained intact in order to

still help tackle loneliness. This was difficult for certain initiatives such as SAAAM. They pushed their creativity to the limits to maintain physical contact with their participants, but at a given moment they also had to take their own health into consideration and could not do everything they intended to do.

3.2. Technology

During this pandemic, technical applications were often used as an alternative to aid in the reduction of loneliness, seeing that there were many limitations in direct social connections. For example, the initiative of GoldenSports highlighted their resilience to COVID-19 as being a product of their techno literacy. This initiative was able to restart within a few days of lockdown being lifted as they had developed a complete database of participants with contact details which allowed for weekly newsletters to be sent. This method of online communication was also the means to resume the initiative. This is in contrast with the other initiatives that were not able to locate or communicate with their participants on the status of initiative reopening. In addition, multiple other initiatives mentioned the need for overhauling their technological interface but the lack of action, stating reasons such as, lack of knowledge, or lack of time as barriers. The reason why this is an important aspect for tackling loneliness is because it allows the participants to rejoin the initiatives more easily.

Another aspect of using technology is the possibility of using it as a medium of providing the service to help tackle loneliness. This was apparent in the interview with Vooruit, where they provided a language class for both an advanced as well as beginner class. The advanced class was continuous while the beginner only one participant remained. The reasoning why this occurred was firstly: due to it being a new group and people did not know each other well, hinting at a lack of structural support, and secondly: participants lacked the required knowledge in the technological department. As a result, they lost people in a group association reducing the effectiveness to diminish loneliness. This lack of technological knowledge is common among the elderly or non-western people as they barely use any technology. This made it harder to get them to participate, when initiatives were performed online. Such as organization SAAAM, as very few people were able to maintain digital contact, they managed to help the people as well as they could. Technology in this instance is of importance for two reasons. Firstly, in regard to Corona it allows for continued interaction (non-face to face) and secondly, gives a medium to tackle loneliness.

Additionally, GoldenSports embraced technological innovation during the COVID-19 pandemic, where they provided both pre-recorded individual workouts online as well as interactive real time exercises over Zoom. This was also said to be the most enjoyable between the two, further indicating that the social aspect is considered important. Despite the success of this interaction it was halted because not all volunteers were able to work with Zoom, and it required more effort to implement.

The use of technology varied a lot between different organisations. Almost all organisations switched something to an online platform. However, only a few really took a benefit out of this constrained technology use, where they could benefit from even after the pandemic in the perspective of reducing loneliness.

3.3. Collaboration

According to ten of the interviewees, a good collaboration between different organisations is in certain cases beneficial in executing activities to tackle loneliness. For example, having a good collaboration with other organisations helped and motivated Sociaal Tuinieren to restart their activities relatively quickly after the COVID-19 lockdown came in place. Sociaal Tuinieren also brought forward how their initiative actually flourished and was started from the collaboration of both Stichting Present and De Nederlandse Tuinenstichting. Through collaboration with governmental organizations and other community organizations with the same goal of interest, they might be able to reach more people. When looking at CombiWel, for example, they enlightened that with the current district care that they have, not

all the people can be reached even though they wish to do so. This suggests that through proper collaboration they could potentially reach more people.

Furthermore, like many relationships in society, certain initiatives emphasised that they were dependent on other organisations to execute activities to help tackle loneliness. Collaborations with other organisations can then aid in providing financial, resourceful, or knowledgeable support. These organisations can range from other initiatives to other stakeholders such as the municipalities and the government. Dance Connects stated how they remain in contact with different organisations to find the right places where they can execute their activities and Sociaal Tuinieren highlights the importance of their relationship with different district administrators to inform on the status of different gardens in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. These collaborations are essential in the functioning of the activities of the initiatives. Contrasting to this, there are also collaborations that are not essential but simply improve an initiative and its activities focused on reducing loneliness. These collaborations often happen between organisations. Sociaal Tuinieren, for example, works with other organisations in certain districts to improve their gardening activities and socialize with the owners of the gardens in question.

3.4. Accessibility

The concept accessibility is mainly about making the initiative as easily accessible as possible. This was a sub theme expressed to be a key factor in the resilience and thus success of the initiative in aiding in the reduction of loneliness. Due to the pandemic, the accessibility to the different initiatives were altered, as safe distance between each other needed to be obtained. Because of this, many initiatives were performed outside. The inside activities were restricted to a certain number of people. Yet, many initiatives had various ways of achieving a low threshold during the pandemic. For example; Combiwel, Vooruit, and Gezond Natuur Wandelen, all have a low threshold of participation by providing their services for free as well as not needing to make an appointment or being obligated to join. This is best illustrated using the example of 'de groene kans' by 'T Blommetje of Combiwel. They had a terrace with seats at 1.5-meter distance and provided free coffee and anybody that wanted to could join. This point of not being obligated to participate is also a point discussed in the GoldenSports interview. However, GoldenSports did have a fee to participate but had different fees depending on the socioeconomic average of their location. For example, participants in Amsterdam Zuid paid 5 euros which was able to compensate for the lower price of 1 euro in Amsterdam West where the economic welfare on the whole is lower. This is also a method of lowering the threshold to participate.

Another method of lowering the threshold done by GoldenSports is by placing the location of their activity proximal to their target group. They researched what areas the most elderly people lived and from this "epicenter" they found a proximal setting. Therefore, people could easily access this initiative.

Another way that could be constituted as lowering the threshold is by having the initiative run throughout the year and in a planned manner, such as same days, times or location. This makes the participant only have to overcome the initial hurdle of participating once and can then continuously join week after week, this is done by both GoldenSports and VoorUit in Osdorp de Wildemanbuurt. This in contrast to having an initiative run sparsely that in which this initial hurdle needs to be retaken time and time again. Continuity is further elaborated on within the social support section of the results. To reiterate, providing services for free or subsidizing, not being obligated to join or participate, continuity, and easy/proximal to the initiative are factors that aid with lowering the threshold.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify what the successful aspects and barriers of community initiatives are in tackling loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic and how these can be utilized to deal with loneliness in Amsterdam New West. An in-depth investigation into factors that are considered relevant in coping with loneliness has been performed. The results of this study suggest that the initiatives tackle loneliness by offering social support, empowering participants, giving participants a sense of belonging and taking mental health into account. Furthermore, the focus of the initiatives has an impact on how effectively loneliness is reduced. Additionally, the resilience of initiatives is an important aspect to ensure the availability of activities for people who feel lonely.

Main findings

Tackling loneliness

Social support

In this study four factors were found and highlighted on how to tackle loneliness. These four factors were social support, empowerment, sense of belonging and mental health. Social support was suggested to be an important need for participants who were considered lonely. This was regardless of what type of loneliness the person was suffering from: emotional or social. Furthermore, each type was seen to have different needs when relating to social support. Participants who were considered emotionally lonely found individual attention and connection with volunteers more useful than participants who were considered socially lonely. On the other hand, the participants who were considered socially lonely found group meeting setting where they can create more bonding relationships with other participants more useful. However, due to the current COVID-19 restriction it may be not possible to do group meetings which may result in the group who is considered socially lonely to get worse. A possible solution to this may be to do smaller groups while holding to the restriction so that both form loneliness can get their required needs. In an article done by Hombrados-Mendieta, García-Martín & Gómez-Jacinto (2013) it was seen that social support has an inverse association with loneliness meaning that if social support rises loneliness decreases. As mentioned earlier in the report, this also came forward in the Hierarchy of Needs by Maslow (McLeod, 2007) that to achieve self-actualization the person would first need to have his basic needs fulfilled then his psychological needs. This is an important step where social support is a part of which then may result in helping tackle loneliness. All of these points help consolidate social support as an important factor to be aware of and to include in any initiative if the focus is to tackle loneliness. However, it needs to be noted that there was no tool used to accurately measure if the participants were actually lonely, it was based more on what was seen and through conversation.

Sense of belonging

When looking at the concept of sense of belonging, it becomes evident that this is a central theme for community initiatives to focus on when reducing loneliness. Sense of belonging is in interplay with different concepts. Motivating someone to improve their own identity and self-worth can ultimately connect them to their community and society and, thus, strengthen their own sense of belonging. Furthermore, trusting these participants and involving them in the process of creating activities to help tackle loneliness. This makes them not only feel as if they belong to something but actually realize that they are indeed needed and form part of something that is bigger than them. Involving participants in the process of creation not only makes them feel like they are needed but also helps make the initiative itself more focused on what participants actually need. Valuing participants also strengthens their sense of belonging. By communicating frequently with them and following up with their process,

initiatives can really show that they value the participant and actually want to help make them feel less lonely.

Sense of belonging and loneliness are connected with each other through the idea that people have, that they need a type of social connection with others. Mellor et al (2008) suggests that these two concepts are inversely related to each other. When someone has a low sense of belonging this manifest on an individual's well-being through feelings of loneliness (Mellor et al, 2008). This is in line with what was found in our research where, conversely, giving people a sense of belonging can ultimately lower their feelings of loneliness.

Empowerment

Empowerment is an important aspect to discuss within the context of people living in the area Amsterdam New West. Firstly, the demographic in this area is mainly lower educated, lower income citizens, with an immigration background (GGD Amsterdam, 2018). In literature a relationship can be seen between having those personal factors and a reduction in both self-efficacy and self-esteem, which in turn can cause loneliness (van Tilburg & Fokkema, 2018; Al Khatib, 2012; De Jong Gierveld et al., 2015). Interestingly these findings are found in multiple, seemingly non-overlapping populations which illustrates this is a generalizable phenomenon.

This information further emphasizes the fact that community initiatives, particularly of our demographic, should aim to integrate methods into their programs that allow for the empowerment of the participants. One of the main ways to ensure this occurs is that the perspective of the volunteer/executors should not be that the participants are helpless or victims but should see them as equals or fighters. This changing of perspective can empower the participant as they feel more in control of their own destiny/problems (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Notably, this aspect of tackling loneliness is of importance regardless of external factors like COVID-19 because it is an integral part of developing social work (Kam, 2020; Adams, 2008)

Mental Health

Although we had some indications from our research that mental health was a factor involved with loneliness, the method of investigation made the internal validity of the findings subpar. The importance of focusing on mental health to tackle loneliness is quite apparent from the plethora of data (Perlman et al 1984; Holvast et al, 2015; El Fakiri et al 2015). The reasons for why mental health, particularly depression and anxiety, were difficult to measure was two-fold. Firstly, our sample group was mainly the executors of the initiative which already moves us a full degree away from the target group of these measurements. Secondly, anxiety and depression are difficult to measure because they are very personal feelings and when asked about can elicit a *social desirability bias* (Caputo, 2017).

Focus of initiatives

Theory

This study found that the focus of the initiatives, their aim and objectives, at times do not match what they eventually accomplish with participants. This can be connected to the three-stranded definition of loneliness, differentiating emotional loneliness from social loneliness. Social loneliness entails the absence of a social group in which an individual can find support, while emotional loneliness refers to the absence of a meaningful person who affirms one's value (Cacioppo et al., 2008; Dunbar, 2014). Our data shows that community initiatives are mostly able to have an impact on social loneliness, which is helpful in preventing loneliness. However, for the actual reduction of loneliness initiatives might need to shift their focus towards emotional loneliness and adjust their aim and activities.

In the current context of COVID-19, this shift in focus might be even more relevant, as it can be expected for feelings of loneliness of people to intensify further. It could therefore become more urgent for initiatives to stop the further progression of loneliness in individuals. Additionally, with the current restrictions in place such, more individual, activities could also be

easier to organise than group activities. However, since it is predicted that people who didn't experience loneliness before could become lonely more easily as well, initiatives aimed at preventing loneliness should still be available. Finding the right balance within a neighbourhood to make sure there is a diverse range of activities aimed at both reducing and preventing loneliness is crucial in the current climate.

Evaluation

Another interesting finding was that the initiatives varied in the extent of evaluations of their own activities. When evaluations are not performed, or not performed frequently, it can be hard to determine whether or not an initiative is tackling loneliness effectively. It has been argued that for community initiatives an adequate evaluation is crucial for their impact to grow (Connell & Kubisch, 1998). Furthermore, a uniform evaluative instrument can increase collaboration between community initiatives and allow for the transfer of successful aspects that are of importance in tackling loneliness more readily.

Resilience of initiatives

Creativity/flexibility

During moments of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, initiatives require a certain level of creativity and flexibility to cope with the situation. Being creative and flexible can aid in developing alternatives for the activities of initiatives or even develop new initiatives. Whether this be a reduction in size of participants or volunteers, or taking social distancing into account, every single initiative challenged themselves to think creatively to ensure that their activities could continue operating regardless of the restrictions set at the time. This had an impact on the effectiveness of certain aspects of the activities.

Technology

The main findings of the research show that technical applications were often used as there were many limitations in direct social connections. This method of online communication was also often the means to resume the initiative or as the possibility of using it as a medium of providing the service. However, lack of knowledge or lack of time were often seen as barriers. During the pandemic, online communication became a necessity, which provides the possibility to maintain social interaction. The study of Nowland, Necka and Cacioppo (2017) suggest that there are contradictory findings about the impact of the digital world and loneliness, where they state that this is dependent on how you use these digital possibilities. If it used to enhance new and/or existing relationships it is useful to tackle loneliness, but if it is utilized to escape from the social world, it can decrease loneliness. The usage of technical applications by the community initiatives can therefore be useful, as they focus on maintaining contacts between people. A study that is established during the COVID-19 pandemic, shows that there is very uncertain evidence that video call interventions are effectively reducing loneliness in older adults (Noone et al., 2020). More research is needed to see whether the online opportunities that are now offered actually lead to a reduction in experiencing loneliness.

Although technical applications can provide a solution, it is important to note that online contact can differ with contact in real life. In the study of Lomanowska & Guitton (2016) it is shown that online social relations can still have similar effects as offline relationships and furthermore, it can also enrich the existing contacts. However, before the pandemic it was more used as an optional and additional tool, whereas during the pandemic is used as a solution, which may differ the magnitude of the effect, which is yet unclear.

Accessibility

Making the initiatives accessible is a key factor in success and resilience of any type of initiative, thus also an initiative tackling loneliness. Continuity of programs offered, distance of neighborhood to the initiative, participation obligation of programs, admission fees and other

costs that are involved, are all aspects that have an influence on the accessibility of an initiative.

A case study was performed on community initiatives in Canada and its path to accessibility. They looked into the accessibility of services and programs, the environment, transportation, and accessible employment. Based on community conversations they tackled these aspects of accessibility. One of the goals was to make initiative services programs accessible for a full range of abilities and develop and provide accessible information about these services and programs (Smith et al., 2019).

The accessibility in the environment in this study mentioned infrastructures, such as curb letdowns and audible traffic signals. On transportation, the study mentioned the struggle of accessible transportation and continues to maintain and improve these and promote affordable transportation when this is being offered by the initiatives. This can be an issue if people who feel lonely with lower incomes live far away from an initiative and do not have the resources to participate in any programs.

An interesting finding of the study is accessibility in employment and support for people with disabilities so they can participate in society. This is interesting when observing loneliness, many programs are developed for a large target group, but taking people with disabilities into account and making sure that they can also participate in executing programs could aid in reducing loneliness. Another interesting finding next to the themes written above is accessibility in language. People could not understand certain phrases or did not master the language that well. This can highly influence the accessibility of a program for people who feel lonely and want to make use of the initiatives if there are no translators or other resources that aid in understanding (Smith et al., 2019).

Collaboration

The findings of this study show how resilience plays a role in community initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Collaboration, technology, creativity, and accessibility are all themes that play an important role in the resilience of community initiatives. Collaboration is important for community initiatives to execute certain activities that need more aid in financial, resourceful, and knowledgeable support. The community initiatives need to form a bridge from the participants to bigger organizations that provide services that could help the participants in dealing with issues like loneliness. The collaborations can range from other community initiatives to different stakeholders, like governmental service providers, that could be of importance for a certain activity.

Although not many studies connect collaboration to resilience, the study of Sieppert et al in 2017 elaborated on how collaborations are an essential component of social work and must be recognized as a requirement in professional settings, and they especially address how to make these collaborations successful. They define collaboration as a relationship between different organizations that are brought together into a new structure by a common goal in which each separate organization contributes by making use of their resources that will lead to a shared product or service. This strategy of sharing knowledge will help tackle loneliness in different aspects since separate organizations could have different target groups and ideals. When collaborating, their expertise in certain areas will lead to a service or product that tackles various sides and aspects of loneliness. The stakeholders are government and nonprofit service providers that come together and share knowledge but also face challenges regarding the costs, patience, and time spent during the collaboration. In the study, they also highlight the importance of personal connections. Both formal and informal communication between the organizations is used in this study, demonstrating the value of using a combination of formal and informal ways to create and maintain relationships (Sieppert, et al. 2017). All these points together help highlight the importance of collaboration.

Additional Findings

Different aspects can be more highlighted in future research to effectively tackle loneliness. One of the aspects that requires more attention in future research is empowerment, where the focus needs to be laid on volunteers and how they can benefit from a community initiative. According to Margaret Gooch (2004) volunteers can become personally empowered and develop skills that they otherwise would not have, leading to improvement of community initiative services in tackling loneliness. Current research fails to acknowledge the importance of the empowerment theory and how it can effectively tackle loneliness in community initiatives.

In this research the main focus laid on executors of community initiatives. The same research can be performed in the future, but rather focus on how participants experience the community initiative instead of initiative executors. It can lead to different insights in how to effectively tackle loneliness and what they experience as successful aspects and barriers of community initiatives.

Another proposition for future research is to execute this research but then in different demographic areas in the Netherlands. It can contribute to the knowledge on how to effectively tackle loneliness by identifying different aspects that contribute to the successfulness of community initiative. By performing this research in different demographic areas where inhabitants have opposing socio economic, educational and immigrational statuses it can provide contrasting aspects in how to tackle loneliness. More importantly would be to see whether the concepts are the same in different demographic areas and therefore to what extent these concepts are generalizable to a greater demographic region.

Limitations

Although our findings give valid insights into how successful initiatives should operate there are some limitations to the study findings. Firstly, the most apparent issue is the generalisability. Qualitative research is inherently not generalizable nor repeatable. However, we do believe that the interviewees sampled are representative of the general sentiment of our target group (community initiatives). Although statistically they may not be representable as a sample size of 12 does not have enough power to make definitive generalisations beyond the research area of Amsterdam New West. In addition, increasing the sample size may allow for higher saturation and more concepts to become apparent that are important for addressing loneliness by initiatives during COVID-19. Nevertheless, the perspectives on the complex problem of loneliness of the interviewees creates a beautiful insight on the actual reality of loneliness.

Another limitation, which was also illustrated within our results, discussion, as well as other literature, is that loneliness is a subjective feeling and is hard to define. In extension, loneliness has a plethora of interdependent factors. However, when conceptualising loneliness these intricacies must be reduced and organised into approachable terms so that particular concepts can be explored. This could result in some important loneliness factors to be overlooked. Despite this, the conceptual framework used in this study is applicable in the setting that was researched.

Interviews of volunteers and managers of community initiatives were an appropriate method of investigation. However, using the focus group methodology could be an interesting angle to investigate during future research. This is because co construction of the successful aspects between different initiatives may yield more fruitful results by initiating a ripple effect, than independent one on one interviews. In addition, recommendations may be more accepted as stated by the *elective affinity model*, which states that policy makers are more likely to react positively to research findings if members participated in the research process (Buse, 2005).

Utilizing the interview guide and a semi-structured interview has some intrinsic drawbacks. Firstly, some questions were not asked as the interviewer had already covered them in a previous answer. As the answer was provided from a different angle than was intended it changed the context of the question resulting in a response which is less

representative than what was planned. Despite this, the semi-structured interview format did allow for more interaction between interviewer and interviewee resulting in more unexpected data to be gathered. Following the completion of the interviews, we found that adding a question regarding whether the changes implemented to cope with COVID-19 will be continued even after the pandemic is over or whether these will be changed back as soon as possible would have been important. For example, Gezond Natuur Wandelen had 20 participants hiking while during the corona pandemic this was reduced to groups of 4. This may result in an increase in functional support. But will this be changed back if the government mandate is lifted?

Recommendations

To create recommendations at the local initiative level, the knowledge gained from the interviews is converted to a recognizable and applicable recommendation. Firstly, recommend that all initiatives continuously provide the service throughout the year. This ensures that the participants that have crossed the threshold of engaging maintain their routine. Although experimental data is scant on this topic, due to the challenges of conducting a randomized control trial on routine, positive effects have been recorded (Arlinghaus, & Johnston, 2018). Such as adhering to the routine of participating giving a sense of accomplishment, which links to the concept of self-constructs and empowerment as previously discussed (Hackensack Meridian Health, 2020). Dr Solhkah also noted that routines “create positive stress levels that keep us focused and may avoid some of the depression that many people may experience as a result of the COVID pandemic, isolation, fear, and uncertainty.”

The second aspect that makes community initiatives successful is the concept of making the threshold of participation as low as possible. This can either be done from a monetary perspective or from the perspective of the initiative itself. Larger initiatives can balance their costs by increasing costs in higher socioeconomic status which can reduce costs in lower socioeconomic stratas. Furthermore, a “pay as you go” approach, in contrast to a subscription, is better as it allows for participation to not be obligated to join.

There are also a few recommendations on a community level. Firstly, participation could be made free once a month, or in regular intervals, allowing newcomers to participate. Secondly, some initiatives implemented smaller group sizes during COVID-19 which may, as our conceptual framework suggests, increase the level of functional support structures. For those community initiatives it may be beneficial to start small scale focus groups in an attempt to uncover whether this truly is the case. It is also important to discuss “intrinsic maturation” which is a phenomenon describing that the more mature a person gets the less open, and extraverted they become. This increases the barriers to participation (Costa et al., 2000).

Thus, another recommendation may be to implement a “refer a friend” model into the initiative. Potentially, awarding perks for every x amount of new participants delivered, as each initiative is different this should be discussed at their own discretion.

The last major successful aspect that emerged from the findings is about the concept of empowering. As previously defined, it is the perception of an individual that they have control over the social aspects of one’s life. Zimmerman eloquently said that “it compels us to think in terms of wellness versus illness, competence versus deficits”. Some methods of empowering can be done by integrating participants into the decision-making process or involving them into shared leadership. Empowerment can also be achieved by executing activities that can have a long-term impact on their lives. By doing so the action taken can have a continuous effect on the participants even after the activity is done. This can be done both psychologically and through material things. This could ultimately aid in empowering participants to gradually integrate back into society based on the actions that were taken during the activities of the community initiative. These actions should focus on connecting the communities where these participants live, making people in those communities feel equal to one another, and changing their perception of what they are capable of doing. Making participants realize that they are capable of doing more than what they believe they can could ultimately empower them to become more independent and feel less lonely. Thus, by connecting the communities through

the creation of meaningful relationships and promotion of both interaction between participants and their respective communities and the perception of their own capabilities, feelings of loneliness could potentially be reduced.

A barrier to having a successful community initiative is the fact that there is no consensus on what loneliness is. This has two distinct implications. Firstly, it makes it difficult to compare different community initiatives. Secondly, it makes evaluation of the initiative difficult, and by extension contrasting efficacy, this aspect will be discussed later. A potential solution is that the Knowledge Alliance in collaboration with a multitude of community initiatives meet together and develop their own conceptual framework encompassing all angles addressing loneliness. This allows for all community initiatives to be placed in categories which are comparable, it is important to note that some community initiatives have a multi-perspective approach and thus can be placed in multiple categories. When a new community initiative is set up it can be highly recommended to join a collective of organisations, like the knowledge alliance, who then automatically groups similar initiatives. These groups can share knowledge with each other and create seminars to discuss novel information regarding their method of dealing with loneliness.

Evaluation is also of paramount importance that a suitable evaluation stage be implemented. Otherwise it is not possible to quantify the impact of the initiative. Thus, we suggest that appropriate quantifiable variables be identified for each approach to loneliness. In addition, empowering initiatives by educating them on how to do their own impact evaluations may be a possibility. Creating these groups also allows for comparing and contrasting the differences in evaluation outcomes and investigating why some community initiatives are performing better than others. This knowledge can then be applied across initiatives.

To analyze whether the given recommendations to the community initiatives and the governmental organisations were implemented and had a positive outcome. A follow-up interview with the organisations would be performed and a focus group discussion with the Knowledge Alliance Loneliness to assemble the insights on the occurring situation. Those insights might tell us which of the recommendations truly have a positive effect in the initiatives aiming to reduce loneliness.

Conclusion

This study set out to determine the successful aspects and barriers of community initiatives in Amsterdam New West that aimed to tackle loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic. By interviewing different initiators of community initiatives, ultimately this research was able to make recommendations to the Knowledge Alliance in order to contribute to the knowledge about and effectively tackle loneliness in Amsterdam New West.

From the interviews, three themes emerged. The first theme, tackling loneliness, is subdivided into social support, empowerment, sense of belonging and mental health. It is important for an initiative to create a sense of belonging for their participants. The effectiveness of an initiative in tackling loneliness is further increased when they are able to empower participants and uplift their self-efficacy. Although the conceptual framework used in this study highlighted mental health as a significant factor of loneliness, this proved difficult to measure through our research method because of the inherent difficulty of discussing these personal matters.

This study further found that the focus of the initiatives was a crucial factor in the effective tackling of loneliness. Although initiatives work from the perspective to reduce loneliness, they mostly prevent it by organising activities that focus on social loneliness. During the current pandemic, it is essential that initiatives organise activities that both prevent and reduce loneliness, as feelings of loneliness are expected to spread and intensify further. As for the evaluation, initiatives should strive to determine what their impact on tackling loneliness actually is, by frequently performing evaluations with adequate evaluative instruments.

Finally, the resilience of the initiatives was found to be of significance for the availability of activities for people that feel lonely. Being able to work in the confines of the corona measures allows for the initiatives to continue providing their services to those who need it. Use of technology within the initiatives fostered contact with participants, helping them to cope with their loneliness even during times of social isolation. Although it is unclear if technology can fully substitute for physical interaction, the utilization of technology to aid in the logistics of initiatives had a positive impact on the feeling of loneliness of participants.

From these three themes a number of recommendations were formed. Firstly, all initiatives should attempt to run continuously throughout the year. Secondly, the initiatives should strive to lower the thresholds of participation as much as possible through provision of non-obligated programs, as well as cheap and proximal to their home. Another recommendation provided is that of using empowerment theory in the build-up of the initiative. Participants should not be seen as being victims of loneliness but need to feel empowered and self-efficacious in deciding their own fate and battling loneliness. Lastly, a recommendation that could lead to great improvement in tackling loneliness is investigating whether the initiatives are actually effective. Furthermore, we recommend forming a series of uniform factors that all initiatives can measure. This allows for comparison and easier collaboration with various organisations. Ultimately, these recommendations have the potential to make a difference for people who experience loneliness in Amsterdam New West.

Future prospects

Further research should address the implementation of our recommendations. By doing this, it is possible to evaluate whether our recommendations are useful, what kind of impact they have and if it led to successfully tackling loneliness or not. In other words, to put our theoretical ideas into practice. Additionally, this research can be elaborated by analysing more organisations and different initiatives. This will increase generalizability and so create a broader perspective of ideas. Also, a focus group methodology can be helpful in achieving this. This research was performed in just two months, so when it is extended, more information can be retrieved. Lastly, overtime people learn to cope more with this pandemic and maybe come

up with new ideas to change their initiative for the best. Another aspect that can be highlighted in future research is the aspect of empowerment of volunteers of community initiatives, whereby developing different kinds of skills that can improve the services of community initiatives.

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Annex 1, Interview Design

Opening

Firstly, we would like to thank you for taking the time to speak to us. We are conducting research on the successful aspects of community initiatives on reducing loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they can be applied to deal with loneliness in Amsterdam New West. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Amsterdam already had one of the highest percentages of loneliness, especially Amsterdam New West. This percentage may have risen due to the pandemic, because social distancing was necessary to minimize the spread of the virus that eventually could lead to increased feelings of loneliness. Moreover, several initiatives that tackle loneliness and that took place before the pandemic could not continue.

With this interview we would like to get your perspective and vision, as an initiator, on the successful aspects of your initiative that tackle loneliness. This interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

Before we start this interview, we would like to ask if we can record this interview. This will only be used for our research, data will remain anonymous. If at any given moment you wish to stop participating in this study this can be done without any problem. Before we start, are there any questions from your side?

Introductory questions

1. Could you please introduce yourself briefly?
 - Name, role within the initiative

Community initiatives and COVID-19 / Activities / purpose

As previously mentioned, we are researching aspects of community initiatives focused on reducing loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic in Amsterdam New West.

1. Could you tell us a bit more about the community initiative you are involved with?
 - How long have you been working/volunteering at this initiative?
 - Is the initiative involved with other organizations?
 - To generalize, what kind of people (age, background, SES) do participate in the initiative?
 - To what extent are the participants informed about the initiatives?
2. How is COVID-19 affecting the community initiative you are involved with?
 - What changes emerged in your specific job because of COVID-19?
 - What changes in activities did you observe during the pandemic?
 - Did you notice any changes in demand from the participants to the provided activities, if so what were they?
 - How did you adapt your programme in light of these changes?

Mental health

Mental health and loneliness can influence each other.

1.
 - Have you noticed that participants get to deal with depression during the corona pandemic?
 - How do neighborhood initiatives tackle depression while combating loneliness?
2.
 - Have you noticed that participants deal with fears (anxiety) during the corona pandemic?
 - How do neighborhood initiatives tackle anxiety while combating loneliness?

Social support

Social support during a pandemic, such as COVID-19, can be helpful in combating loneliness.

1. Does the initiative you are involved in give participants the idea / feeling of receiving support from their social circle? (functional)
 - How is that idea aroused by the initiative?
 - With how many people do the participants come into contact with due to your initiative?
 - Do the same people come more often with each other in contact?
2. How has the social support in the form of (physical) social contact changed, with regard to the initiatives for the participants, during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - Did the initiative help participants to increase their social network? If so, how?
 - From who did the participants receive the most social support during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - How has COVID-19 changed the number of contacts and the way of contacting other people within the initiatives?

Social perception

Social perception is influenced by various factors such as internalized stigma and discrimination. Social perception could play a vital role during a pandemic and can be useful in reducing loneliness.

1. Does the neighborhood initiative you are involved in address these issues, such as internalized stigma and discrimination? If so, in what way?
2. Which group of participants (age, background, SES), from your perspective, struggles the most with internalized stigma during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding loneliness
3. Which group of participants (age, background, SES), from your perspective struggles most with discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic regarding loneliness?
4. Do you think the participants feel comfortable in the social groups in which these activities take place? If no, can you give an example of how to deal with situations like this?

Self-construction

The image people have of themselves and their capabilities can be an interesting factor when it comes to resilience and loneliness during a pandemic like COVID-19.

1. In regards to someone's self-esteem, how does your neighbourhood initiative address this in dealing with loneliness during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Do you believe the participants' self-reliance has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What change in attitude do you see in participants from the beginning of a program to the end?

Wellbeing

COVID-19 and loneliness can have a major effect on people's well-being.

1. Do you think that participants feel that they can meet with as many people as they want (freedom) because of the initiatives?
2. Do you think that the participants can take the initiative themselves to do things without the help of others, such as doing their groceries? (independence)
3. How has the participants' physical health been changed by the initiatives?
4. Is there time and space for the participants to really develop a bond with the other participants? Are the participants returning?
5. Do you think the activities that are undertaken make people feel they belong? (sense of belonging)

Success of initiative

When looking in more detail at an initiative there can be different aspects and characteristics that help make it a success.

1. What are to you the most important aspects when it comes to ensuring a successful community initiative?
 - Are these aspects represented in all programs within the initiative?
 - When a program is considered successful, do you organize these more than once?
 - When developing an initiative, how do you start? Do you start with theory or with what feels right? (Key #1: Theory of Change / Theory)
 - When implementing an initiative, does the result differ from the initial vision? (Key #2: Implementation)
2. In your experience, are these aspects the ones the participants also acknowledge as most important?
3. How do you think the relationship between the executors of programmes against loneliness and the participants aid in the effectiveness of the programme?
4. What are the common pitfalls that one should be aware of when organizing a community initiative?
 - What kind of measures do the organizers of initiatives take to make the programmes feasible and accessible?
 - In group programs against loneliness, how can the degree of control be improved to increase the efficacy of the programs?
5. Many citizens that feel lonely are not aware that there are community initiatives out there to help. Has this happened with the community initiative you are involved with?
 - How do you make sure that the initiative reaches the people that need it?
 - How do you evaluate your own initiatives? (Key #3: Evaluation)
 - When are the initiatives planned? (outside work time/weekends?)
6. How are the participants involved in this community initiative?
 - Are they included in the creation process of the initiative?
 - Do you ask feedback from the participants regarding the initiatives? If so, how do you utilize this feedback?
7. How would you describe success in the initiative you are involved with?
 - How was it decided what the initiative was meant to do?
 - How do you measure success of the initiative?
 - What actions does the organization take to make this possible?
 - Is the initiative temporary or is continuously ongoing?
 - Do you believe that this helps in the success of the initiative?
8. From your personal opinion, which characteristics of the initiative are the most successful ones? And why?

Closing

We have come to the end of the interview, but before we end the interview we wish to ask one last question:

We have dealt with everything we wanted to have dealt with.

Are there certain things or topics that have not been discussed, but that you think are relevant to our research? If yes, could you tell us something about this?

Are there any further questions you would want to ask us?

We would like to thank you again for participating in this study. After we finalize our study would you appreciate it if we send it to you?

Annex 2, Description Table

#	Organization	Description
1	Combiwel	Combiwel is a community center, which is subsidized by the government. The services of Combiwel differ from childcare, parenting support, sports and neighborhood development, broad talent development, debt services and social welfare work. This takes place in different community centers in Amsterdam New West. For this research a GGZ (Geestelijke Gezondheidszorg/ Mental healthcare) coach, who focuses on the accessibility of the community center, and two volunteers, who work at the community center were interviewed. One of the volunteers helps in an informal way, with for example their taxes or job applications and the other one is more directly involved with the activities.
2	Hart van Osdorp/ Combiwel	The goal of Hart van Osdorp is to create opportunities for meeting, connection and empowerment (Hart van Osdorp, 2020). To make that happen they organised activities together with the people in the neighborhood and made use of practical tools, such as language lessons (Hart van Osdorp, 2020). For people with emotional loneliness they organised other activities, whereby talking with them in a face- to face setting was the most important to understand their feelings (Hart van Osdorp & Combiwel, 2020). Examples of these activities were: a lunch in 'de Stadsboerderij', a coffee afternoon and they initiated to bring soup and talk with them.
3	Vooruit	Vooruit is an organization, which consists of 80 students who, in addition to their studies at the VU, UvA or HvA, are committed to the neighborhood where they live. They organize various activities in the neighborhood to improve the social cohesion. The organisation is divided among different districts and each district has a team of approximately 11 people. The activities organized are part of different teams and the priority of these teams is determined by a yearly evaluation meeting. One of these teams is loneliness, but the organisation has a broader focus (Vooruit, 2020).
4	Movisie	Movisie is a national knowledge institute that tackles social issues such as loneliness. Their goal is to realize a sustainable positive change in the lives of vulnerable people by translating insights from research to tools that can be used in practice. By organizing debates they bring people in contact with each other so that they can learn from one another. Furthermore, they provide background articles on policy and current developments ("Over Movisie", n.d.).
5	WijkLeerbedrijf	This organization focuses on elderly people and on people with a distance to the labor market in Amsterdam New West. Most of the people are lonely because they can not sufficiently participate in society. 'WijkLeerbedrijf' offers them a learning trajectory in healthcare where participants visit elderly people as a form of internship. It is a symbiotic informal relationship where the elderly offer for example language courses and the student does groceries for the elderly. In this way, the initiative tries to tackle loneliness in two different societal groups by creating a helpful relationship with a purpose.

6	SAAAM	This organization focuses on elderly people and on people with a distance to the labor market in Amsterdam New West. Most of the people are lonely because they can not sufficiently participate in society. 'WijkLeerbedrijf' offers them a learning trajectory in healthcare where participants visit elderly people as a form of internship. It is a symbiotic informal relationship where the elderly offer for example language courses and the student does groceries for the elderly. In this way, the initiative tries to tackle loneliness in two different societal groups by creating a helpful relationship with a purpose.
7	Golden Sports	They organize sport activities for elderly (65+) at multiple locations in Amsterdam including Amsterdam New West. In addition, they license out their initiative around the Netherlands. Lastly, the ethos of the initiative can be summed up as being "making interpersonal connections through communal outside activities".
8	Gezond Natuur Wandelen	This initiative organizes weekly walks in the countryside. The walks start at a fixed place and time and are guided by volunteers who also tell you something about nature along the way. The walks are primarily intended for 65+ who would like to exercise a bit more, more everyone can freely participate.
9	Stichting Present & Nederlandse Tuinenstichting	"Sociaal Tuinieren" is a collaboration that started between Stichting Present and the Nederlandse Tuinenstichting. They specifically focus on disadvantaged neighborhoods in Amsterdam, such as Geuzenveld (Amsterdam New West) ("Over Sociaal Tuinieren", n.d.). The purpose of this initiative is to refurbish the gardens of people who are not able to do this independently (anymore) and are often socially isolated. This refurbishing is done by a group of volunteers who then periodically return to maintain the garden. During this process the volunteers connect and socialize with the people being helped and in doing so aid in lowering feelings of loneliness ("Over Sociaal Tuinieren", n.d.).
10	Stichting Dance Connects	"Dans voor de deur", an initiative that falls under the organization Stichting Dance Connects, was developed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Dance Connects, 2020). The main focus of Stichting Dance Connects is on the expanding and professionalizing of the target group of seniors and to further strive for a structural and differentiated dance offer for various groups of seniors in Amsterdam. Furthermore, the main purpose is to bring the widest possible audience into contact with dance and other art forms and thereby establishes connections between art and society through various activities (Dance Connects, 2020). These activities are done with the help from professionals, amateurs and also volunteer workers. Lastly, these activities have 4 main points on which they try to strive for: participation, social cohesion, combating loneliness and/or promoting welfare (Dance Connects, 2020).

Annex 3, Coding Guide

Themes		Subcategories	Definition
LONELINESS	SOCIAL SUPPORT	Functional	The perception that support resources would be available from one's social network if needed
		Structural	The number and types of connection within an individual's social network
	SELF-CONSTRUCT	Self-esteem	Individual's subjective evaluation of their own worth.
		Self-efficacy	A personal judgment of "how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations".
		Attitude	Manner, disposition, feeling, position, with regard to a person
		Comfort	A state of physical ease and well-being
	SOCIETAL PERCEPTION	Internalized stigma	The extent to which process, where afflicted individuals themselves endorse mental illness stereotypes on themselves
		Perceived discrimination	The degree to which one feels that they are currently mistreated by others due to their situation
	MENTAL HEALTH	Depression	Feelings of severe despondency and dejection
		Anxiety	Feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physiological changes like increased blood pressure
	WELL-BEING	Freedom	The power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants
		Independence	Relates to the internal ability of doing something without depending on others
		Physical health	Related to our context as many people were not able to participate in their normal activities
		Sense of belonging	A sense of belonging is a human need, acceptance as a member or part, most important in seeing value in life
COVID-19		Social distancing	Maintaning a physical distance between people
		Isolation	The process or fact of isolating or being isolated.
		Restrictions	A limiting condition or measure, taken by the government as a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic
COMMUNITY INITIATIVES	SUCCESSFULNESS	Theory	The first part; more broadly called theory of change is a frameworking method to ensure success. It focuses on what the long-term goal is and then works back retrospectively and makes assumptions on intermediate preconditions in the medium- and short term
		Implementation	specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions
		Evaluation	Feedback, action and reaction
		Resource/System Support	Needs