



## Factors influencing social satisfaction and loneliness: a path analysis



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### ABSTRACT

Social networks have increasingly received attention in transportation research. However, more subjective aspects of the social network, such as social satisfaction and loneliness hardly received any attention in travel behavior research, whereas these aspects are very important in shaping quality of life. In this study, a path analysis is used to analyze the relationships between personal characteristics, neighborhood characteristics, travel behavior, social interactions, social satisfaction and loneliness. The analyses are based on data collected in Eindhoven and surrounding towns in the Netherlands in a survey among 177 respondents. Results show relationships between mobility and social aspects. They indicate that frequency of walking affects social satisfaction, frequency of cycling affects the number of social interactions and car ownership affects loneliness. Regarding the neighborhood characteristics, interesting results are found as well. The percentage of non-western ethnic minorities in the neighborhood is found to negatively affect social satisfaction, social cohesion is found to affect the number of social interactions and place attachment is found to affect loneliness.

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### 1. Introduction

Loneliness has become a serious health problem (Kearns et al., 2014). Being included in a social network and having social opportunities are important aspects that could influence the well-being and happiness of individuals (e.g. Umberson and Montez, 2010; Delmelle et al., 2013). An increased number of academic studies analyzed the relationship between mobility factors and the well-being of individuals (e.g. Spinney et al., 2009; Nordbakke and Schwanen, 2014; Ettema et al., 2010; Delbosc and Currie, 2011).

In transportation research there has recently been an increased interest in social networks and social activity travel behavior. In a number of studies, mobility factors (e.g. car ownership, walking for transportation and frequency of using transport modes) and demographic factors were found to influence the number of social activities (e.g. Newbold et al., 2005; Farber and Páez, 2009; Van Cauwenberg et al., 2014; Carrasco et al., 2008; Páez and Farber,

2010; Van den Berg et al., 2011a; Kemperman et al., 2006). However, these studies focus on the quantity of the social network while social issues such as loneliness and social satisfaction were hardly taken into account.

It is not only the number of social activities, but mainly the quality that is important to people's wellbeing (Umberson and Montez, 2010). A lower number of social activities does not necessarily mean that people feel lonelier or are less satisfied with their social contacts (Bonsang and Van Soest, 2012; Delmelle et al., 2013) and people with a large social network are not always more satisfied with their social life. People can feel lonely as the consequence of 'life events' (e.g. loss of a spouse, divorce, relocation and marriage) (Von Hippel et al., 2008), that might cause some changes in the social behavior and in the social network of individuals (Wrzus et al., 2013). Moreover, people might be different in terms of preferences or desires for social contact and social interaction as a result of different outlooks on life or on personality traits (e.g. Nordbakke and Schwanen, 2014). This could also influence the perception of satisfaction with their social life. It is therefore important to focus on subjective feelings of loneliness and social satisfaction in addition to more quantitative measurements of social activities.

Given the background and motivation discussed above, the aim of this study is to analyze the spatial and mobility-related factors that influence loneliness and social satisfaction. The analyses are

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based on data collected in Eindhoven and surrounding towns in the Netherlands, among 177 respondents. The data are analyzed using path analysis.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature on the relationships between loneliness, personal characteristics, mobility characteristics and characteristics of the built environment. Section 3 describes the data collection procedure and the sample. In Section 4 the analysis methods and results are addressed. Finally, Section 5 contains the conclusions and a discussion.

## 2. Literature review

Loneliness is likely to be an important aspect of aging and a serious health problem (Russell et al., 1978). De Jong Gierveld and Van Tilburg (2010) define loneliness as:

... the subjective evaluation of the situation individuals are involved in, characterized either by a number of relationships with friends and colleagues which is smaller than is considered desirable (social loneliness), as well as situations where the intimacy in confidant relationships one wishes for has not been realized (emotional loneliness).

Loneliness can be the consequence of changes in the social network (e.g. divorce or the loss of a loved one), the lack of a large and diverse network and the absence of children nearby (Von Hippel et al., 2008). Social interactions could increase the feeling of being socially integrated and decrease the feeling of loneliness (Knipscheer et al., 1995).

In this study, social satisfaction is defined as being satisfied with one's own social contacts and one's social network in general. Most studies on the social network focus on the size and composition of the social network and on the amount of social contact, not on individuals' perceptions of loneliness or social satisfaction (Hughes et al., 2004). For instance, Wellman et al. (2005) studied social networks of individuals in the Connected Lives Study and suggest that the size of the network positively influences the number of neighbors in the social network. In addition, Van der Houwen and Kloosterman (2011) suggest that older people, people with high incomes and natives, have more frequent contact with neighbors.

A growing number of studies describe the connection between social networks and travel behavior. Van Cauwenberg et al. (2014) for example, examined the relation between the perceived social environment and walking for transportation. In this study, a relationship was found between walking for transport and social interactions with neighbors. Moreover, Carrasco et al. (2008) analyzed the spatial distribution of social activities and the distances between individuals and their social network members. They suggest that members of the social network who live nearby were seen as supportive social members and that new entrants in the neighborhood have more social interactions at a great distance than people who have lived in the neighborhood for a long time.

In addition, Van den Berg et al. (2009) studied the relationships between personal characteristics, characteristics of the built environments and travel behavior mediated by the effect of ICT-use and aspects of the social network. Findings of this study suggest that people who own a car tend to have a larger social network; a car could help to maintain social contacts at a larger distance. Regarding the effect of personal characteristics on the number social interactions, significant effects were found for age, education, work, living with a partner, the presence of children, social network size and club membership (Van den Berg et al., 2009).

Moreover, Páez and Farber (2010) analyzed the participation of people with disabilities in leisure activities (e.g. visiting friends, doing exercises or attending events). Demographic variables (e.g. age, gender and household characteristics), mobility disability and the frequency of using transportation modes, were found to affect the participation in leisure activities.

There is one study in transportation research that aims to predict social satisfaction, as a result of personal characteristics, housing and residential characteristics and transportation variables (Delmelle et al., 2013). Delmelle et al. (2013) defined social satisfaction as the level of satisfaction with one's social life. Respondents were asked to report how satisfied they were with their social contacts, ranging from most satisfied (6) to least satisfied (1). Results show that the health status and financial situation of individuals could affect social satisfaction. Regarding mobility, commute time and car ownership were found to affect the satisfaction with social contacts (Delmelle et al., 2013). Delmelle et al. (2013) state the importance of including feelings of loneliness and isolation in research on the relationships between social satisfaction and mobility factors to provide a better insight into the relationships.

Walking is an important factor for social satisfaction. A good walkability improves health conditions and leads to more spontaneous and intentional social interactions (Glanz, 2011). Leyden (2003) claims that people who are living in a walkable, mixed-use environment are more likely to know their neighbors and are more socially involved. Van Cauwenberg et al. (2014) conclude that people who have more social contacts are more likely to walk for transportation.

Another study in transportation research analyzed the relationship between transport mobility benefits and the perceived quality of life of elderly Canadians (Spinney et al., 2009). This research includes four benefits derived from travel activities namely, psychological benefits, exercise benefits, community helping benefits and community socializing benefits. The domains that were used to measure the quality of life are happiness, life satisfaction, job/main activity satisfaction, sense of belonging to local community and the time spent alone. Findings of this study suggest that happiness is positively correlated to psychological-, exercise- and community helping benefits. However, no relation was found between life satisfaction and transport mobility benefits. Respondents who spend more time alone were found to be exposed to fewer benefits (Spinney et al., 2009).

Other studies on social satisfaction have been conducted by social scientists. However, they rarely focus on mobility aspects. For instance, Bonsang and Van Soest (2012) analyzed the determinants of social satisfaction of elderly in eleven countries in Europe. They concluded that income, contact with children and non-professional activities affect the satisfaction with social contacts. Moreover, Helliwell and Putnam (2004) studied which factors influence life satisfaction, happiness and self-assessed health status. Results of this research show that people with high incomes have a higher life satisfaction.

Windsor et al. (2012) claim that residents who live in a neighborhood with a higher level of social cohesion have more social contacts and feel less lonely than residents who live in neighborhoods with a low social cohesion level. Kolodinsky et al. (2013) found that a sense of community is an important factor for the quality of life. Broese van Groenou et al. (1999) suggest people living in a more homogeneous and higher income neighborhood are less lonely. Buffel et al. (2011) also found that social characteristics of a neighborhood, such as a large proportion of non-western ethnic minorities and a large proportion of people with a low-income, have an effect on social contact between neighbors (Rubinstein and Parmelee, 1992).

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